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Wild Women

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Climbing the (White) Ladder to Success

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MY FAMILY HATED ME BECAUSE OF HOW I MADE A LIVING. MY NEIGHBORS IN the quiet building in Dallas, where I had resided for over ten years, were not-so-quietly working to have the condo board association force me into selling. They were not vague in expressing their desires for me to move far away. It seemed that dutifully tending my terrace garden and living a peaceful, single life was not quite good enough for them either.

Consequently, on a crisp Sunday morning with summer nearing its abandon to fall, I sat reading a real estate website for homes in the Garden District of New Orleans. The sunlight through the open terrace glass doors was changing to a softer glow. I caught a breeze with the scent of leaves no longer new. I couldn't help but look out and think back, the lyrics from a G-rated Disney movie as the background music in my head: *Shotgun shacks and mansions, Sugar barons and cotton kings. Rich people, poor people, they all got dreams. And dreams do come true in New Orleans.*

Ten years ago, the economy tanked. I lost my high-paying sales job because of a corporate reorganization where no one gave a damn about my stellar performance and loyalty. Two years later, I tapped into my initiative and started a business at my desk in the kitchen. Now I own a warehouse, have 100 employees, and do more than \$250 million in annual sales.

You might wonder why my hard work and good fortune pissed off so many people. It turns out they don't outwardly like my customer

base—even though some of them are a part of it. Behind closed doors and private mailboxes, my customers are addicts.

No, I am not a drug dealer. And no, again, I'm not trying to use some lame language to deny responsibility for being a drug dealer. And a third no to the presumed next question, "What, you sell bong and other paraphernalia?" My customers think I am one talented marketer and often give me artistic inspiration. A few vulgar people and groups believe I'm the type of businesswoman who is leading society straight to hell. Tacitly, even more, people want to own my creations. They care little about the noise and revel in the puckish legend of how it all started.

In those long, lonely days after my unemployment checks stopped, I sent out over 400 resumes in a thirteen-month period of time that started in late 2009. I got two interviews and no offers. So, I began to take an inventory of what I did best and realized that I had been selling myself with the products I represented—and not in the biblical sense. My extensive research and dedicated knowledge of each customer's business needs (and their customers' wants on down the retail channel) were unwavering. I had made it easy for my customers to do business with the family-friendly (and internally bellicose) Crazy Crown Company where I had worked for over twelve years.

Having brought over \$120 million in sales of party products to those corporate assholes, they decided I was no longer necessary because my territory was locked up tight under contracts (that I had won) for seven years. I had sold myself out of the job that another rep (a longtime drunk and notorious yes man) would then inherit to manage day-to-day issues—and get my commissions.

Joblessness created nervous anxiety in every waking moment, but I found fleeting inner solace with Reece's Miniature Peanut Butter Cups. I had to have the miniatures because of the quintessential peanut butter-to-chocolate ratio. And while grieving the loss of a job I loved, shit like this was absurdly necessary. Wearing worn-out sweatpants was important too. At the height of five foot eight, you can gain ten

pounds and your clothes will still fit. When you spend nearly eighteen months eating your feelings of inadequacy and wearing what my mother would have called “trash picker clothes,” you can pack on enough weight to bloat up to three dress sizes. Welcome to my chubby world.

My lackluster family’s interest in my financial hardship was met with Depression era–like advice to “just go knock on doors because exposure could bring an opportunity.” When I reminded them that “People die from exposure,” they stopped calling and sending inspirational cards because, “Really, dear, you’re getting to be so bitter about life. Maybe you should be more grateful. And it couldn’t hurt to drop all that weight you’ve gained.” Right.

Adding to my hermit-like existence was a total lack of exercise and general grooming that I used to take for granted. My shoulder-length haircut had grown long and straggly down to my boobs. The once golden-flecked highlights in my chestnut hair showed eight inches of roots, and I had neither the money nor the desire to perform any self-maintenance. All emergency funds were gone. I had traded in my one-year-old Lexus sedan with a note for an eight-year-old one with no payment. My next step was to take a desperation job (like working in a shopping mall food court) or get a grip on making an income to support myself because no one else was volunteering financial assistance.

Looking in the mirror one morning, I gasped and said out loud, “Jesus, look at you!” as the horrified face staring back at me was wearing a stain-smudged sweatshirt with my jiggling jowls. I followed it up with my customary internal war cry against a business competitor, “Fuck ’em.” I was fed up with being sorry for myself and tapped into the unmitigated anger I felt. Then I resorted to doing what I knew I did best and committed to making money for the only company I could trust 100 percent—mine.

I had to get my professional appearance together. It was time to kick my own ass before others. I won’t lie; this was the first of many

battles with myself, and that first clash was the hardest. I had to exercise *in public* because I couldn't afford a private trainer. A local recreation center is a demoralizing place to work out among your neighbors when you need to lose a ton of weight and look like crap.

Nevertheless, I put my headphones in, climbed onto a treadmill, and hoped that if I kept my eyes shut, I would be safe in my playlist of old-school R&B hits blocking out any pseudo-social interaction. Along with "the gym," I knocked myself back to eating a daily 1,500-calorie, low-carb diet. I resigned myself to the fact that fiscal solvency and looking good trumped prurient enjoyment.

At the same time, while I was sweating my ass off, I needed to think about where to find a limitless market. What could I sell with a contagious excitement that would make enough people want to tap into it? On a stinking treadmill was where my research initiative started. My head was getting back into the game. At home, I would end up on the webpage of yet another webpage—you know what happens when you stray-click on mindless shit while wandering on the internet. It was the last click that would be the first step I took to create my company when I landed on Etsy.

Etsy is an online marketplace for small, independent artists and craftsmen. If you make glittery hair bands for preteen gymnasts or middle-aged transvestites, Etsy is the place to post your products for sale because it appeals to a younger and eclectic crowd that buys one-of-a-kind, handmade stuff. Have you just discovered your love of blowing glass into Christmas ornaments? Make a few distinctive samples, photograph them, and then post them on Etsy. Custom-make each one to order, and you have no cash tied up in inventory. Your customer prepays you before you spend one cent on materials. Also, there is a rare and elusive customer personality who shops on this site. Etsy customers have incredible patience because they appreciate and seek out craftsmanship in the unique products they buy. Sales and manufacturing on your time frame with others' money for someone broke is the ultimate business cash management concept.

I was working hard toward the packaging of myself as the frontline salesperson of my company. I had found the platform to launch it. Now all I needed was the product that would rock a little piece of the world for sales. And then for one dreadful moment, everything came to a standstill.

Richard, a former colleague of mine, had died of an accidental prescription drug overdose. I was shocked and saddened. However, I was not surprised.

A hard partier for many years, Richard's lifestyle was a true-life urban tale. At six foot three with the Black Irish coloring of dark hair and eyes and creamy complexion women envied, he was once an attractive and charming man. Great at sales no matter what the product, each year as his successes increased, his habits did as well. Even when his closest friends and I suggested that his pharmaceutical cocktails were like a contest juggling razor blades where a winner was still a loser, he didn't want to hear about it. When family and friends gathered for the last time with Richard's corpse as the guest of honor, there were few tears.

After his funeral, some of Richard's nearest and dearest gathered at his favorite dark and overpriced bar to lift a glass in his memory. While I picked at the spicy nut snack mix the bartender had set out, some of the others split a few white ladders to go with their drinks. And that's when it hit me. Almost everyone I knew from anxiety-ridden high school kids to my stressed-out middle management friends, to my great-auntie—they all had a prescription for Xanax.

If you have never seen Xanax in its original form and are being held hostage to the generic, alprazolam, by an insurance company that doesn't see the beauty in name-brand goods, fear not. The most popular size of Xanax, the two-milligram tablet, is a miniature work of art. The rectangular white tablet is scored with perpendicular lines in between each letter of its name: X|A|N|A|X. Stand it up on end and it looks like a tiny white ladder—hence the street name used by those who partake regularly.

So, there I was nursing my one glass of house red while the rest of the group were so mellowed out they didn't even care that their bar bill was pushing into four figures when they ordered their fifth bottle of Perrier Jouet champagne to toast our old colleague who had relaxed right into the grave. I didn't understand their nonchalant attitude toward mixing substances; they all thought that I didn't appreciate the stress in their lives that necessitated downing prescription pills with booze.

What I did understand loud and clear was that they all thought there was an ultra-cool vibe to their behavior. And people who were willing to spend this kind of money to keep up a persona would buy anything that promoted that façade to their group of peers.

What the 1990s had done for the style of "heroin chic," I saw in that bar the new style market for this decade—the *FanAddict*. This ever-growing group of people looked out at the world with glazed-over eyes and dreamy smiles. They saw themselves as an enviable caste adorned in their wraithlike fashion and accessories. And any group that was this stupid about the safety of their health was probably also self-indulgent enough to buy anything to vindicate their behavior—and share it with friends.

I left the bar early and walked home alone. I felt filled with an energy that I could barely contain and nagging knife-like thoughts poking at my conscience. My head was pounding with an internal argument.

The Still Silent Voice said, "It's wrong, what the hell's the matter with you?"

The Seductive Murmur purred, "It's perfect. You know you'll make a fortune."

The Still Silent Voice shushed, "People will make you out to be a drug dealer and killer who preys on the weak."

The Seductive Murmur hissed back, "Fuck 'em; you can't pay next month's mortgage."

Guess who finally won out?

I opened the door to my one-bedroom condo, dropped my purse, shoes, and jacket and pants on the floor. I walked straight over to my desk and sat down in my best work outfit—a T-shirt and panties. With just the overhead lamp turned on, I stayed there for over eight hours with my tools for war—drawing pads, multicolored sticky notes, pens, and pencils. When I realized I had to pee, the sun was coming up. As I got up and started walking to the bathroom, I looked back at my desk. The concept drawings of a unisex fashion line covered it—everything from fabric designs to jewelry and accessories.

From tiny white ladder decorative buttons for shirts to flowing fabric prints for clothing—I found the chemical makeup of alprazolam was an elegant geometric design. Extracting pieces of the molecular composition, I created patterns that would be printed in various colors and overlaid with an aesthetic nuance paying tribute to the drug that over 50 million people were swallowing every day in the US (“not counting worldwide users,” whispered the Seductive Murmur). Designs were covert; in fact, these pieces could be an addict’s private communication, an inside joke among their social behavior alliance.

I decided to fabricate jewelry for the first sample pieces. With small round and long tube silver-colored beads strung in a specific order, the design represented the Morse code dot-dash concept. The pendant charm spelled out *Xanax*. The complimentary dangle earrings with five beads each spelled *white* and *laddr*. I could make it in sterling silver, 14k gold, or platinum and encrust the dots with diamonds or another favorite gemstone. Clients could adorn themselves while advertising very private preferences. I could convert any pharmacological favorite into an understated announcement or invitation.

For my start-up, I had to make a set of photography samples from cheap materials until I got those initial prepaid orders in. I also knew that the biggest and best group for market testing was only a few blocks from my home in the small consignment boutiques of the nearby gay-borhood. If the chic boys wore it, the hot young waifs

would follow. Then the rest of the ripples of teen fad cliques and middle-aged suburbanites desperately seeking one last grasp at a youthful persona would spend their money like a Juicy Couture tidal wave.

I fell into my bed and slept hard for ten hours. Then I got up, showered, and dressed for the day in jeans that hadn't fit in a few years and a little cotton sweater that showed off hard-won curves. For the first time in so many despondent months, I looked almost like my old self. Silently, I promised to get to the hairdresser as soon as I received my first payment for a sale. I left my condo and got in my eight-year-old Lexus sedan to drive over to the local craft store where a buffet of silver-like beads and findings awaited me. For the time being, this was the only source for materials I could still charge to my last credit card.

In three days, I made twelve samples with digital photos that I took with my iPhone. My next-door neighbor, Matthias (a laid-back musician living off royalties from his 1980s hits), helped me with photo enhancements and uploading the pictures to my new Etsy store site. I thanked him for his help and promised to make him a batch of his favorite brownies for payment as he walked to my door to leave. Still an easygoing '80s dude, he said, "Cool, sounds good."

As I was closing the door behind him, Matthias stopped, turned around, and said, "You know, I'm going to a party tonight. I could wear some of your stuff if you wanted."

I wanted.

Even though Matthias's last hit song had been almost thirty years ago, there had been a renaissance of sorts with middle-aged fans paying to download his music on throwback satellite radio stations. His label, always looking to milk every dime they could out of their artists' catalogs, often invited him to keep the parental gatekeepers of their nubile pop singers entertained. Matthias gladly obliged because "record label appearance checks still cashed, and the food and booze were free." Having never gained a pound and graying in a silver-fox

fashion, he looked like a distinguished version of his former bad-boy self. “Cougar candy, still with a taste for the tender young ones who are getting harder to convince,” he once said.

No one could have predicted what was going to happen that night at the party. But to this day, I swear in the recesses of my mind I heard the Seductive Murmur utter, “Rock ’n’ roll time.”

Less than twenty-four hours later, my FanAddict Twitter and Instagram accounts blew up. Some freelance paparazzo had gotten photos of Matthias wearing my necklaces and bracelets. While hanging on his recording label’s hot, eighteen-year-old pop star, Matthias’s one hand was copping a feel while the other was draping a few of my necklaces over her head. A tabloid TV news website had gotten a quote from Matthias about him “being a huge fan and addicted to her music, so I gave her some FanAddict jewelry.”

It went viral.

My virtual store crashed Etsy’s host site. They forced me to move my domain to a new host that could handle the traffic. Hello, Amazon.

As more publicity was generated about the new, irreverent designer who was “glamorizing prescription drug usage,” the longer people would wait for delivery of my products. From a segment on a national news show about my “meteoric, yet controversial rise” in the world of fashion to a religious organization’s documentary demonizing my company and me (which continued to endear me to my family and neighbors), every week brought at least one raised eyebrow from me. I still occasionally wondered how in the hell did all this happen?

Nevertheless, it did.

I no longer struggle with the disgust in the eyes of those who once claimed to have only my best interests at heart while I continued to disappoint them. I had reconciled myself to the fact that when I could barely keep a roof over my head, their response was to abandon me. Hence, some relationships hadn’t changed all that much.

Now I just needed to finalize the purchase of a new home, then schedule the movers to take me to New Orleans—a place with a long history of not intertwining sound business judgment with public morality. Perhaps I might have an opportunity to expand my corporate interests there. An online business website I regularly read had a short piece on a particular party goods company recently falling on hard times from poor management. I smiled knowing that the cosmic bitch, Karma, was sending me good juju, as they said in my soon-to-be new hometown.

Before long it would be time to advance to the next rung as I climbed the (white) ladder to success.