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MEETING LISA

by Norbert Kovacs

Darren McNeil, a numbers analyst in Statistics, really liked Lisa D'Amico, a logistics analyst in Forecasting who worked around the corner from him in the east wing. When their departments held meetings in the big conference room, Darren sometimes peeked at her down the table, smiling and chatting with her fellow analysts. He doted on Lisa's lustrous dark hair, her brown eyes, and her lean, neat figure. When Lisa spoke to the group, he enjoyed listening to her. She colored her remarks about future profit with anecdotes about woodland animals and her two nephews. He thought she was friendly and considerate, although her words to them were only over business.

When Lisa was among friends at the meeting, Darren saw that she nodded and listened more than spoke. Darren was shy himself and believed he might do well befriending another quiet, introverted person like her. His only problem was going up to Lisa to talk. If he risked meeting her anywhere except the conference room, fear struck him like lightning. Hearing her approach his cubicle, he bowed his head toward a corner. His long, wide glasses slid down his nose, and his thin body tensed. He listened and did not relax until he knew Lisa had passed. It was worse when he heard or saw her while walking up the hall. His mouth twitched, and he stepped from the hall into an empty office to avoid the encounter. Darren sensed the awkwardness of doing so. He imagined how much better it would be to meet her than to run. However, he felt he could do it only in his dreams.

Then, in the spring, Darren's corporation was holding an employee festival as part of its Rewards and Recognition Program. The festival was to take place at the convention hall across town and have public fair-style entertainment, music, and food. The event would be a paid weekday off and the corporation strongly encouraged all of its employees to go. The idea of the event sat well with Darren; in fact, it seemed like the opportunity he needed with Lisa. In the event's fun, easy environment, he imagined he could talk to her as he had hoped. All he needed was to feel a tad less nervous.

To help him, he sought out Lupe Sanchez, a program reviewer in his work unit. Lupe was the most outgoing, vocal person in his office. She loved chatting with coworkers by her cubicle; her round, full face always animated as she spoke in an easy stream. Many times, he heard her confident voice clear from another room. "Wait until I tell you..." she would say in high spirits. Lupe spoke to manager and clerk alike without fear or anxiety. She knew how to approach anyone. Maybe she could tell me how I should, Darren thought.

He decided to share lunch with Lupe on a Tuesday. The two ate at a small table in their corporation's busy cafeteria. Darren tried to subtly raise his problem. He did not want embarrassment, just advice.

"Lupe," he said, "what would you say I should do if I feel nervous about someone?"

Lupe stared. "Why be nervous around someone? Forget being nervous. Just talk to them."

"I wish I could. You see, I'd like a certain person to be my friend, and I haven't told them."

"If you like them, just show it. People enjoy feeling liked. The more you show it, the easier it'll be."

"That sounds sensible. I may not be confident enough to do it, though."

"Talk about things you have in common. You have something like that?"

"We both work here."

"Talk about the corporation, your jobs. Make it a thing."

"I don't know."

Suspicion suddenly clouded Lupe's full face. "Why do you like this person, may I ask?"

Darren hesitated. He believed he would share too much if he said why. However, he wanted Lupe's advice badly. "She's very nice," he said finally. "I hardly get to see her. She's a kind person."

"So, it's like that? You're after a woman but are worried about scaring her off? Well, you'll have to do things a bit differently. We are talking about romance."

Darren tensed. "I guess."

"Then, you'll have to be good to her. A woman doesn't have to like you. A guy has to earn it. Give her attention. Look at her sometimes. That should help her understand you like her. On the other hand, don't hover over her: she'll feel you're dominating. A guy has to show he cares, too. Give her compliments, do small favors, help her out. However, don't overdo it. She'll think you're a nuisance."

"How will I know when I've given the right amount of attention? How do I know I've cared right?"

"She'll show you in the way she reacts, and then you can figure her out. She may like a lot of attention and she may not. Some days, she'll enjoy that you care, some days less so. Maybe she'll go back and forth to test whether you like her. If you do, you'll go along with it."

"How would I know she's testing me? How do I know if it's all a game?"

"You have to figure it out."

Darren's head swam. He did not know whether to go boldly to Lisa when he saw her next or to try quietly after the department meeting. He worried both about saying and not saying that he liked her. The idea that Lisa might judge him by some strange logic threw him. He sensed he had entered uncertain waters as they finished their chat.

As the corporation festival neared, Darren felt that, despite Lupe's advice, he lacked a concrete way to approach Lisa. He considered his best option now was just to practice talking with her. If he could start and maintain a conversation, he could connect with her. He practiced in his apartment one evening. He enlarged and printed a photo of Lisa from her Facebook page. The picture showed Lisa half turned toward the camera, smiling modestly, her thick, dark hair like a flower bell. The enlargement marred the original detail—Lisa appeared less a person than a patchwork of peach, brown, and black—but it was the size he needed to practice talking with her from about two feet away. He taped her photo to the wall, walked up to it, and started to speak.

"Good to see you again Lisa," he said, inclining his head shyly. "I hope you are doing well?"

He imagined Lisa's reply. "I am," he said for her.

"Good." Darren stopped. Anxiety froze him. He did not know what else to say. He started again.

"Nice event, isn't it?" he said, meaning the festival that would be occurring around them.

"It sure is," he said for her.

"Many people here." Darren said this casually to seem inviting. "Have you talked with a few?"

"I have."

Darren fell silent. He felt he was not advancing well. His stops were jarring. He did not believe an exchange of this kind would carry interest. So, he decided to try yet again from the beginning.

"Did you have a chance to go around with your friends and see things?" He leaned with his shoulder toward the picture as if interested.

"I have with Anita and Betty."

"How was it?"

"Alright."

"Which booths did you hit?"

"We went to the ball toss and the ring throw."

"How did you like it?"

Darren did not have to answer. He sensed he had asked enough questions that Lisa would think him nosy. He did not mean this, of course. The thought dismayed Darren, and he covered his eyes with his hand. He asked himself what he might do now, but, after everything that had not been answered, he did not know. He seemed lost in a fog. When he dropped his hand, he studied Lisa's picture as the black, brown, and peach squares that formed her blown-up image stared blankly at him. He remembered the kind, beautiful Lisa he knew and spoke to the photo without stopping to consider his words.

"I wish I could talk to you—just have a short, simple conversation. I could tell you all about me. But if you were worried I talk too much, I wouldn't; I'd listen to you, instead. I'd listen all afternoon. I'd be—too happy." Darren turned from the photo and

walked with head bowed into the other room.

The day for the festival came the next week. The corporation bussed its thousands of loyal employees across the city to the convention center. In the venue, circus style booths, concession stands and performers were found throughout the huge room on the main floor. The corporate crowd descended on them, filling the room wall to wall. Darren had come with everyone else, but he did not wander about like them. Instead, he kept to the empty corner between the dart throw and the Wheel of Luck. He was still doubting how and whether to go and talk to Lisa if he should meet her. He still did not believe he could talk to her without fumbling his words or acting like he was made of cardboard. The thought of her being interested would surely confuse him, and then he would second-guess his moves and give up. He expected problems on all fronts.

This pessimism plagued Darren, and he tried to forget it by observing the crowd that filled the convention hall. He made a game of finding the faces that gave him the most amusement and surprise. He spotted a man at the Target Shoot squinting with an eye over a BB gun, much like a cyclops. Then there was the fellow at the ball toss who inflated his cheeks like a pair of balloons before he threw. At Roll the Ball, a young woman froze with anticipation as her ball barreled toward the top-scoring hole. Further afield, a clown laughed, his face paint breaking into wrinkles.

When he had looked completely across the great number of people, Darren saw Lisa in the far corner opposite him. She was alone, idly surveying the crowd. Her dark, thick hair was just right, her brown eyes lustrous. Her thin figure showed in her polka dot T-shirt and her knee-length, pleated skirt. He studied her kind face, which turned quietly to a side every now and then. She's just as uneasy as I have been today, he realized. His fear dropped a notch at the thought, and he felt moved to go talk to Lisa as he had been planning.

Darren crossed the room, maneuvering past his noisy co-workers and the bright, garish entertainments that filled the open floor, and reached Lisa's corner. Only a few groups of people were moving there. The one booth near Lisa, the Guess Who, had offered a game where people tried to guess which of their co-workers showed their masked face from behind a curtain. Currently, it was untended and without visitors. Darren drew beside the booth and

straightened. He took a short breath, faced his colleague, and said, "Nice to see you, Lisa."

Lisa gave Darren a small smile of recognition. "Good to see you, Darren."

"Different than the meetings at work, isn't it?" he said with a short, awkward thrust of his hand toward the crowd.

"It is. Louder, too."

"Have you...enjoyed the festival?"

"I have, yes. My friends and I went to some booths."

"Was that fun?"

"We enjoyed it. So, how about you? Have you enjoyed today?"

Darren tensed as he recalled that he had been admiring her from the far corner. He knew he could not mention it. So he said, "I guess it's been alright... I've gone around. At the ring toss, I won a keychain."

"Good." The two fell quiet and faced the crowd. Darren felt their silence grow awkward.

"This is a nice corner to study everything from," he said, trying to keep up the conversation. "Almost nobody comes by."

"Yes—right now, that is. There were people at the Guess Who before."

"Was it popular?"

"It seemed to be."

Darren turned toward the booth. On a small table before it lay several of the peculiar masks used in the game which he had noted when he came to talk. Moved by curiosity, he went to the table.

"Masks," he said, his hand rifling among them as Lisa turned to see. He picked up one with a gray face set in hard, long creases. The forehead sagged as if about to pour over the brow. Deep, hard-edged circles hung below the small eye holes; under these, the cheeks squeezed toward the mouth. "This one is scary."

"Seems like it."

Darren studied the mask and said suddenly, "I wonder how

I'd look wearing it." He put the mask to his face and fitted the band behind his head. The mask pressed his face hard. The deep creases sat on his cheeks, and the rigid circles beneath the eyes dug at his eye sockets.

Lisa smirked at Darren. "It's like your skin dried up."

"I feel it too. Yikes! But how did anyone talk in this?" he pursued. "It has the thinnest slit for a mouth, more a cut than anything. I feel like I'm speaking to the inside of this instead of aloud."

Darren's upset tone made Lisa laugh. He was happy to hear her, and, on a gamble, almost not thinking of his words, said, "Wouldn't it be funny if I wore this at one of our conference meetings? No one would know it were me. I could pretend to be someone else. What if I wore it while working in my cubicle? What do you think? Would my boss realize it were me?"

Lisa laughed and shook her head.

The mask still on his face, Darren reached over the Guess Who table and picked up a second mask. It was a cat's face, colored gold with small, pointed ears on top. The face had a squat, black nose, long oval eye holes, and dark whiskers painted over the cheeks.

"This looks fit for you," he said as he showed Lisa the mask. "Why not try it on?"

Lisa cautiously studied the cat face, gave Darren a smile, and said, "Okay." She slipped on the mask and secured the strap. The gold mask fitted her as Darren hoped. The smooth, gilded brow, the rounded line to the cheek, the small, thin mouth all matched her face. "Your mask suits you," he said.

Lisa's eyes showed her embarrassment within the slanted eyeholes. "I feel silly in this. Like I have plaster all over my face."

"I wouldn't fret. I think the mask gives you a great complexion. Very golden."

"Oh, thank you. And I thought it made me look like a cat."

"It does. Don't you feel like one?"

Lisa considered. "I might."

"Prove it. Prove you're a cat."

“Mee-yow.” Lisa spoke this as if saying two different words.

“Feline of you to say.” Feeling carried away, Darren added, “Can you wiggle your whiskers like a cat?”

Lisa lifted a hand toward the mask and touched the whiskers painted on its front. She considered for a long second, then took the sides of the mask in her two hands and pulled them up and down several times the way a seesaw moves. The whiskers of the mask appeared to wiggle.

Darren laughed. “So you can. You did that just like a cat.”

Their light mood over the masks subsided and Darren said, “I don’t think I’d have recognized you in that mask unless I had known. I bet hardly anyone playing could have.”

“They didn’t, you know. I was here when a big crowd played the game. Nobody guessed who had on this mask or a bunch of others. They had to make eight or nine guesses.”

Darren smiled within his mask. “They must have liked the game if they kept at it.”

“I think they did.” Still looking at Darren, Lisa gently took off her mask. Her dark eyes and fair complexion showed to him as they did when he had come over to talk. She was wonderful. Wonderful, not simply beautiful. The brightness of her eyes and the softness of her cheek all seemed new, no longer hidden by her mask. Darren’s old sense of worry, his anxiety to be formal with her, crumbled. He slipped off his own mask and said, “We don’t need to talk through these anymore, do we?”

He tossed the gray, worn mask onto the table by the Guess Who and, for the rest of the afternoon, spoke to Lisa as he had long meant.