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Selling Beauty

A playful inquiry into beauty in organizations

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Cast of Characters

Dana: VP of Marketing of Natco
Frances: CEO of Natco
KG: COO of Natco
Martin: A Professor
Wanda: A Chief Nursing Officer (CNO)

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(Dana, Frances and KG come out and speak directly to the audience one after the other.)

- DANA:** You know why they tell us how the stock market is doing every night on the news? Is that really news? Of course, not. Does it really matter to anyone? If it does, they already know. No, they tell us because the newspapers always listed it every day. And why did the newspapers list it every day? Because years ago, people wanted to know. Joe Schmoe on the street didn't care about the Dow Jones, but he did care about the total number of shares traded, well really the last four digits of the total number of shares traded. Because that the number was so large, the last four digits were effectively a random number that no one could affect. So long before we had state sponsored lotteries with their random daily number, Joe Schmoe could play his daily number with his bookie, and the number he was betting on was the last four digits of the number of shares sold that day. And the mob needed that number to be in the newspapers so everyone would know whether they won or not when they played the numbers. So, because the mob needed the daily number printed, we now have every damn television news station reporting on what the Dow Jones did today. Now that, is beautiful. The mob gets the papers to print the volume of shares, but they can't just print the volume of shares without also printing the Dow Jones because that would look too weird, so now we all hear about the Dow Jones average every day. Beautiful, just fucking beautiful.
- FRANCES:** They gave these guys the Nobel Prize in Physics for the work on exotic states of matter. And the Nobel Committee says it's because the math is so beautiful. Of course, the math also turns out to be right, but the point the committee makes is that the math is beautiful. And really, that's what I want to do in business. I want a beautiful strategy.
- KG:** I know it's cliché, but I was taking an early walk this morning, watching the sunrise over the lake, and I just stopped and watched. For a couple of minutes, it was the most beautiful thing in the world. And then it was done.
- DANA:** So, LeBron James names his Mt Rushmore of basketball players and he doesn't include Bill Russell. Russell responds, "Hey, thank you for leaving me off your Mount Rushmore. I'm glad you did. Basketball is a team game, it's not for individual honors. I won back-to-back state championships in high school, back-to-back NCAA championships in college. I won an NBA championship my first year in the league, an NBA championship in my last year, and nine in between. That, Mr. James, is etched in stone." Beautiful, just beautiful.
- FRANCES:** Have you ever watched a world cup football match? When one of the best players in the world lines up a free kick and then curves it over the wall of players, past the keeper and into the net? Everyone knows what he's trying to do, but they can't stop it. It doesn't always work, it doesn't even happen very often, but when it does it is a thing of beauty.

KG: When my three-year-old smiles up at me. That's the most beautiful thing in the world.

(Dana, Frances, and KG exit. Martin and Wanda enter.)

MARTIN: It was incredible. You would never think that a bunch of business leaders would get excited about beauty.

WANDA: Why not? Everyone appreciates a little beauty.

MARTIN: Well, sure, but this was in the context of business. In the context of leading their company.

WANDA: I can certainly imagine longing for a little beauty in our hospital's leadership team.

MARTIN: Still bleak?

WANDA: That's health care these days.

MARTIN: I think there's always room for more beauty.

WANDA: For us, two times zero is still zero.

MARTIN: You're CNO, you could do something.

WANDA: Yeah, I know, I'm part of the problem.

MARTIN: That's not what I meant.

(Pause.)

WANDA: I'm glad your executives have the time to talk with you about beauty.

MARTIN: I'm sorry. I know it's been a tough year.

WANDA: I don't think you really do.

MARTIN: I'm sorry.

WANDA: I know, you said that.

(Pause.)

MARTIN: I'd really like to do something with this beauty work.

WANDA: So, do it.

MARTIN: Something more than writing a journal article.

WANDA: Another book? After the last one you said you would never write a book again.

MARTIN: Not a book.

WANDA: "Too much work, too little impact." That's what you said.

MARTIN: People don't read books anymore.

WANDA: I do.

MARTIN: You're not like most people. And I love that about you.

WANDA: I love you, too.

MARTIN: I want to do an intervention.

WANDA: Consulting?

MARTIN: I think they're open to it. I think they are ripe for it.

WANDA: That's worked out so well for you in the past.

MARTIN: I've always been able to get companies engaged in my work.

WANDA: In your research. Those huge consulting fees haven't exactly been rolling in.

MARTIN: That's because that's how I pitched it to them. I pitched it as research.

WANDA: You didn't want to get paid huge consulting fees? This is the first I'm hearing of this.

MARTIN: I wouldn't have minded.

WANDA: How long have we been married? How long have you been a professor? And in all that time you haven't wanted to get paid consulting fees?

MARTIN: I have been paid for work I've done.

WANDA: Honorariums. Token fees. Trust me, I have to pay consultants, and you don't get paid like we have to pay them. And they all complain about how low the rates are when they work with hospitals compared to the rates they charge in the corporate world.

MARTIN: That's what I'm saying. The corporations are used to paying consulting fees. By your standards, and by mine, huge consulting fees.

WANDA: So, this is great news. You're going to do consulting.

MARTIN: Yeah, I think it is great news.

WANDA: The life of a tenured professor. I suppose the university will even like that you're consulting – something about having real impact in the world.

MARTIN: I suppose.

WANDA: What aren't you telling me?

MARTIN: What do you mean?

WANDA: You have that look, there's another shoe about to drop.

MARTIN: I think I need to do this full time.

WANDA: Are you up for sabbatical again already?

MARTIN: No.

WANDA: So what, leave of absence?

MARTIN: That doesn't seem to be an option.

WANDA: You've already talked with the Dean?

MARTIN: And the Provost.

(Pause.)

WANDA: So, that's the other shoe.

MARTIN: Yes.

WANDA: You'll resign? Give up tenure? Give up your chair?

MARTIN: I think that's the only way.

WANDA: And hang up your shingle and consult.

MARTIN: As long as I'm still a professor, they will think I'm doing research and want me to give away my time.

WANDA: And that will all change when you become unemployed.

MARTIN: When I become a full-time consultant.

WANDA: Why haven't you opened any wine? Usually you tell me these things over wine.

MARTIN: How about over dinner out instead? I'm thinking the Oyster House.

WANDA: Does that mean there's another shoe to drop?

MARTIN: I made a reservation.

WANDA: Oh my god.

MARTIN: I'll drive.

(Martin and Wanda exit. Dana enters. Martin enters.)

DANA: So, bottom line it for me.

MARTIN: I teach your staff to see beauty.

DANA: Okay. Why?

MARTIN: A refined aesthetic sensibility will enable them to see more, to see better, to see differently...

DANA: So, this is about market analysis?

MARTIN: Not directly.

DANA: Strategy?
 MARTIN: It would inform both.
 DANA: So, you think they don't see beauty now?
 MARTIN: Not in the business world.
 DANA: They don't see a beautiful opportunity, a chance to screw over the competition as being beautiful? I think they do. I think that's exactly how they see things.
 MARTIN: That's not what I mean. I'm talking about developing aesthetic sensibilities, about the ability to really engage your senses, to stay with your senses and see what others aren't.
 DANA: I don't follow you.
 MARTIN: As humans we have a tendency to quickly scan the world, match what we see to existing mental models and then work from those existing mental models rather than continuing to pay attention to the world around us.
 DANA: Sure. That sounds efficient.
 MARTIN: It is, it saves a lot of energy.
 DANA: And that's what you are going to teach my team not to do?
 MARTIN: Yes.
 DANA: You are asking me to pay you a lot of money to teach my team to be less efficient?
 MARTIN: I wouldn't put it quite that way.
 DANA: I just did. And frankly, just between you and me – since we're old friends and all – my team doesn't need any help being less efficient.

(Dana exits. Wanda enters.)

WANDA: They're voting tonight.
 MARTIN: What do you think?
 WANDA: They'll strike. They have to. We have backed them into a corner.
 MARTIN: Doesn't sound good.
 WANDA: It's ugly. The CEO has acted like a spoiled child. He's been all about power and looking strong.
 MARTIN: And you?
 WANDA: The nurses have a case. I don't even think it's been about money for them, more about safe practice and reasonable working conditions.
 MARTIN: Sounds difficult.
 WANDA: Difficult? It's been impossible. It's been absolutely horrible.
 MARTIN: I'm sorry.
 WANDA: I don't know why I bother.
 MARTIN: You care. You care about the patients. You care about the nurses.
 WANDA: That's not what I meant.
 MARTIN: What you do matters.
 WANDA: It's killing me.

(Pause.)

MARTIN: Maybe you should step down.
 WANDA: *(Laughs.)* Right.
 MARTIN: I'm serious.
 WANDA: I think at least one of us should have a job. *(Pause.)* Sorry.
 MARTIN: No, you're right.
 WANDA: How did today go?
 MARTIN: I got ripped a new one.

WANDA: Oh.
MARTIN: But I'm learning from it. I just haven't figured out how to pitch it, I haven't found the compelling argument, the business case.
WANDA: The business case for beauty?
MARTIN: Yes, I do believe there is one. I just need that first champion, that one executive who sees what I see and is willing to take a chance.
WANDA: Yes, that would be nice.
MARTIN: You don't think I'll find them. You don't have faith.
WANDA: I have faith in you. But I don't have faith in the business world.
MARTIN: Maybe the business world is a little more enlightened than the hospital world.
WANDA: Over the years I have watched as the hospital world learned from the business world. We became "managed" and brought in practice after practice, from total quality management and six sigma to the learning organization. Every year there's some new thing from the business world. And every year it becomes a little darker, a little less enlightened, a little less caring, a little more soulless. So from where I sit, no, the business world isn't more enlightened than the hospital. It is crueler and meaner and the more we learn from business the crueler and meaner we become.
MARTIN: Sorry.
WANDA: I didn't become a nurse to be cruel and mean.
MARTIN: I know.
WANDA: I didn't become a nurse manager to be cruel and mean.
MARTIN: I know.
WANDA: And I certainly didn't become the chief nursing officer to be cruel and mean.
MARTIN: No one is saying you did.
WANDA: But when the nurses go on strike, you know what the hospital, what that little spoiled brat of a CEO is going to make me do? He's going to make me be cruel and mean, to the nurses, to the patients, to the staff...

(Wanda exits. Frances enters.)

FRANCES: You really think there is beauty in the workplace?
MARTIN: I think there can be.
FRANCES: I wish there was.
MARTIN: I think we can create it.
FRANCES: Here's the thing. We may claim to be all about innovation and doing things differently, but really what we're really good at is copying. One of our competitors does something a little differently and we can copy that. Sometimes we can bring a couple of things other organizations are doing together and then we have the next new thing. That's what we do, we copy. We don't really create.
MARTIN: So you need to see someone else with a beautiful strategy, with beautiful marketing, with beautiful operations, and then you can copy it?
FRANCES: It's a chicken and egg problem. I need to see beautiful leadership and then maybe I can copy it. Maybe.
MARTIN: I don't think you give yourself enough credit.
FRANCES: I'm in business, I give myself too much credit. It's what we do, it's what I do. *(Pause.)* So, here's the thing. No one ever got fired for doing the same thing everyone else is doing. But if you do something different, maybe it works, maybe it doesn't, maybe it's beautiful, maybe it's ugly. Either way, you're at risk. So, why be at risk?

MARTIN: Don't you think it's worth risking something in pursuit of beauty?

FRANCES: That's why I love talking to you academics, you say the funniest things.

(Frances exits. Pause. Wanda enters. Pause.)

MARTIN: How was it?

WANDA: It sucked. *(Pause.)* How did your thing go?

MARTIN: I sucked.

WANDA: The hospital CEO put on scrubs and came onto the floor. He hasn't practiced medicine in twenty years. He nearly killed a patient.

MARTIN: You stopped him?

WANDA: Yes.

MARTIN: Nicely?

WANDA: No. He was ordering meds – oh, it doesn't matter what he did, it would have killed the patient.

MARTIN: So?

WANDA: I stopped him. We had words.

MARTIN: Not nice words.

WANDA: Not beautiful words.

MARTIN: And?

WANDA: I don't work there anymore.

MARTIN: He fired you?

WANDA: Yes.

MARTIN: Ouch.

WANDA: Yeah.

(Pause.)

MARTIN: You never liked that narcissistic, little prick anyway.

WANDA: No. *(Pause.)* But I do like the hospital.

MARTIN: So, what now?

WANDA: Wine.

MARTIN: Fair enough.

WANDA: I take it you didn't get a contract?

MARTIN: No. Not even very close.

WANDA: So, now we have no income.

MARTIN: None.

WANDA: How long before we burn through our savings and start eating up our retirement?

MARTIN: I don't know.

WANDA: How long before we lose our house?

MARTIN: I think we'll be okay for a while.

(Pause.)

WANDA: I really hate this.

MARTIN: Yeah.

(Wanda and Martin exit. Frances and KG enter.)

FRANCES: Have you heard from our friend, Martin?

KG: Yes. I suspect that everyone in his contact list has heard from him.

FRANCES: It's a little sad.

KG: Well, yes. But why do you say that?
FRANCES: Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of beauty. But selling it? That just seems wrong.
KG: Beauty should be more than that?
FRANCES: Beauty is more than that. When I watch a beautiful goal, they weren't trying to be beautiful, they were trying to score a goal.
KG: It is sort of one of those things, if you want it you can't have it. Sort of something you can only get by accident. Well, not by accident, but you only really get beauty if you aren't trying to be beautiful?
FRANCES: That theory would make beauty pageants ridiculous.
KG: They are ridiculous.
FRANCES: And the whole beauty industry?
KG: That's what makes the whole beauty industry work. The sheer impossibility of the goal of intentionally making yourself beautiful means that there will always be unfulfilled demand.
FRANCES: Fair point. Endless, unfulfilled demand. That does make me smile.
KG: Do you think we should tell Martin this?
FRANCES: I think he's figuring it out.

(Frances exits. Martin enters.)

MARTIN: I know this sounds crazy, but let's just try it.
KG: Just try it?
MARTIN: We run the workshop. If you don't like the results, you don't owe me anything.
KG: Satisfaction guaranteed?
MARTIN: Yes. So, there's no risk to you
KG: Other than a half day of my team's time. Which is of course a much bigger expense than what we would pay you.
MARTIN: That's true. But nothing ventured, nothing gained.
KG: So, tell me, what exactly would we be doing in this workshop?
MARTIN: We'll go to an art museum. And each person will select one work, one painting or sculpture or whatever. Then they will sit and look at that work for three hours.
KG: Three hours, just sitting and staring at a painting?
MARTIN: Yes. And I'll give them a notebook to write down what their experience is like as they sit there, what they notice and how that changes over time.
KG: And after the three hours of staring at the painting?
MARTIN: We'll talk about the experience over drinks and a nice dinner.
KG: Okay, so we go to an art museum, stare at a painting, or other work of art, for three hours and then have dinner and talk about what that was like.
MARTIN: Yes, that's the workshop.

(Pause.)

KG: Of all the ways that I can spend my team's time, which by the way I often refer to as our most precious resource, you think it would be a good investment of that precious resource to spend an afternoon staring at a single painting and then talk about what it was like – over drinks and dinner?
MARTIN: Yes. Yes, I do.

- KG: So, help me play this out a little. I am imaging, Bert, who runs manufacturing. So, what was that experience like, Bert? And Bert says, "after a little while my butt started to hurt. And then I began to wonder what the hell we were doing here and whether KG had gone crazy? Have you gone crazy, boss?"
- MARTIN: That could happen. It's not generally what happens first, but it can be part of what happens when we talk about the experience. It is a very unusual experience. We're not used to engaging with something that is static for a prolonged time. Your team's lives are chaotic, full of action, and constantly interrupted by one thing and then another.
- KG: Martin, I like you and I have a great deal of respect for your work with and about organizations. So, I'm going to be straight with you. You might think that as COO I have almost unlimited power. But I don't. I only have so much power and I have to be careful about how I use it. I think that doing this would use up a huge chunk of power. And it represents a big risk. I just don't see it as a risk that I can take.

(Dana and Frances enter.)

- FRANCES: No.
DANA: Hell, no.
KG: So, no. Thank you.

(Wanda enters.)

- WANDA: No?

(Dana, Frances, and KG exit.)

- MARTIN: No, thank you.
WANDA: No. *(Pause.)* That's it? Just no?
MARTIN: Yeah.
WANDA: Yeah. *(Pause.)* You know the elementary school at the end of the block? They're looking for a nurse.
MARTIN: A school nurse?
WANDA: Yes, they are a school. It would be a job as a school nurse.
MARTIN: You want to take a job as a school nurse?
WANDA: No. Of course, I don't want to take a job as a school nurse. The pay is pathetically little, the job manages to be both difficult and boring at the same time. It's a very special version of hell.
MARTIN: So, don't do it.
WANDA: I don't want to be a school nurse, but it's a job. It would be income.
MARTIN: We're surviving.
WANDA: We're broke.
MARTIN: We'll make it.
WANDA: We're hemorrhaging cash. We're spending our savings; we're spending our future.
MARTIN: We'll find another way. I don't want you to take a job you'll hate.
WANDA: I don't see that as a choice right now.

(Pause.)

- MARTIN: I'll get a job.

WANDA: Doing what?
 MARTIN: I don't know. I'm sure there is something that I can find.
 WANDA: You'll go back to academia? Will the university take you back?
 MARTIN: I doubt it. But maybe.
 WANDA: I'll take the school nurse job.
 MARTIN: No. You'll hate it.
 WANDA: It might be nice to do some hands-on nursing again.
 MARTIN: What do you really want to do? If money were no object, what would you want to do?
 WANDA: I don't know. Money is an issue, so it's a silly question.
 MARTIN: I think it's worth thinking about. Maybe getting fired from the hospital is an opportunity to re-imagine your life.
 WANDA: Don't give me that consultant speak. Getting fired sucked. It still sucks. I've been working at the hospital for most of my adult life.
 MARTIN: Do you want to go back?
 WANDA: No. That's over.
 MARTIN: So, I think it might be worth thinking about what you want for the future? How do you want to spend your time? Are there problems you want to solve, people or groups you want to help, something you want to do?

(Pause.)

WANDA: I do love nurses. And I hate the way the medical system treats them.
 MARTIN: So maybe that needs to be at the center.
 WANDA: Nurses become nurses because they want to help people. And the system makes it so hard sometimes and then blames them for it.
 MARTIN: Unity in variety.
 WANDA: What?
 MARTIN: Unity in variety. When the different pieces fit together into a single whole. That's what you want, right? That's what you don't have in the medical system.
 WANDA: I suppose. But who's going to pay me to work on that?
 MARTIN: I don't know. That's the question, isn't it?
 WANDA: Sometimes you are such an academic. What difference does it make if I call it "unity in variety" or "please don't shit on the nurses"? It's still nothing that anyone is going to pay for.
 MARTIN: I know. *(laughs.)* I know.
 WANDA: I don't get the joke.
 MARTIN: The joke's on me.

(Martin exits. Pause. Wanda exits. Dana enters. Martin enters.)

DANA: We've been through this, Martin.
 MARTIN: And thank you for being willing to hear me one more time.
 DANA: I've known you for a long time. I respect you.
 MARTIN: So, tell me what's your biggest problem? What's your burning issue?

(Pause.)

DANA: That's what I love about you, Martin. You're such an academic.
 MARTIN: Not anymore. I've left the university.
 DANA: You can take the boy out of the ivory tower, but you can't take the ivory tower out of the boy.

MARTIN: Help me.

DANA: Okay. What you just asked. You think I have a single burning issue, and I know what it is. And at the same time, you see my organization and the world we live in as incredibly complex, full of nuance and complexity. As an academic you can hold both of those ideas at the same time.

MARTIN: I see how that could feel contradictory.

DANA: I can't hold either of those ideas. I know that I don't have a single burning issue where fixing it would make everything better. I live in the real world, and I know that I have a hundred different fires that have to be put out every single day of the week. Some of them require my attention, some of them can be handled locally, and some of them I probably don't even know about. And the complexity and nuance? Sure, in some way that's true, but I don't have time for that. I have to act. And action has a way of clarifying things. Unless it makes things muddier. But either way, I'm moving forward.

MARTIN: Yes.

DANA: So as much as I love your deep insight into all things organizational, I just don't have the freedom to take an academic perspective.

MARTIN: I'm not an academic anymore.

DANA: Yes, you are.

MARTIN: How can I convince you that I'm not?

DANA: A consultant would never ask that question. They would just do it. Know me by my deeds, not my words.

(Dana exits. Frances enters.)

MARTIN: One of the more intriguing definitions of beauty comes from Mendelssohn, the composer. He said that the essence of beauty was unity-in-variety.

FRANCES: Unity-in-variety? That sounds nice, but what does it mean?

MARTIN: Of course, Mendelssohn was focused on music, so he was talking about the way for a performance of a piece of music to be beautiful, the various individual parts had to come together into one organic whole that was greater than the sum of the parts, thus achieving unity from the variety of the orchestra.

FRANCES: I see that.

MARTIN: I think it is even more true for organizations. You have a variety of people, with a variety of motivations, different priorities and needs, and when it comes together into an organic whole that is so much more than the sum of the parts, that's when an organization is beautiful.

FRANCES: I suppose so.

MARTIN: That's why organizations exist, right? We organize to accomplish things we can't accomplish alone?

FRANCES: I suppose so.

MARTIN: Why else?

FRANCES: To make money? To dominate the world?

MARTIN: Neither of which we could do without other people being involved.

FRANCES: Okay.

MARTIN: So, do you think we could work with that idea?

FRANCES: I think you could work with that idea.

MARTIN: But not we?

FRANCES: Martin, I love you. But I don't work with ideas. I work with people, I work to execute strategy. As the leader of an organization, I don't know what it would mean to work with an idea about unity-in-variety.

MARTIN: We can figure that out.

FRANCES: And I'm sure it would be interesting and at times even enjoyable.

MARTIN: But?

FRANCES: No.

(Frances exits. Wanda enters.)

MARTIN: How was it?

WANDA: It wasn't beautiful if that's what you're asking.

MARTIN: So, how was it?

WANDA: Well, the big thing today was Christina, a cute little second grade girl. She seemed to be just starting a cold at the start of her day. And probably her mom should have kept her home from school, but she needed to go to work and didn't have anyone who could take care of Christina at home, so sending her slightly sick child to school seemed like the better choice. Of course, Christina got worse as the day went on. By the time she came to my office, she was coughing so hard that she started projectile vomiting. All over everything, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, me.

MARTIN: That sounds horrible.

WANDA: Not beautiful? There was really unity in the variety of places she threw up.

MARTIN: I'm sorry.

WANDA: Don't be. This is the reason they have a school nurse. It's what my job is.

MARTIN: I don't think I could do that.

WANDA: No, probably not.

MARTIN: I am beginning to think that there's not very many things that I could do.

WANDA: You have many talents.

MARTIN: I have reached the stage of life where my options are narrowing rather than expanding.

WANDA: It might be worth thinking about what you want for the future. How do you want to spend your time? Are there problems you want to solve, people or groups you want to help, something you want to do?

MARTIN: Am I that annoying?

WANDA: Often. But I love you anyway.

MARTIN: I don't deserve you.

WANDA: Of course not.

(Wanda exits. Frances enters.)

MARTIN: Thanks for finding the time for me.

FRANCES: I can always find time for you, Martin.

MARTIN: I'll cut to the chase.

FRANCES: Probably not.

MARTIN: No, probably not. I've been thinking about the consulting engagement I've been talking with you about.

FRANCES: The beauty thing?

MARTIN: Yes. And I've come to the conclusion you shouldn't do it. You shouldn't bring me in as a consultant to help your team work with beauty.

FRANCES: Go on.

MARTIN: I don't think it's the sort of thing that can be done with an external consultant.

FRANCES: Not even one as talented as yourself?

MARTIN: Well, maybe I could do it. But it's not the best way. It's not the way you should do it.

FRANCES: Even if I begged you, dangled huge piles of cash in front of you?

MARTIN: In all good conscience, no. My answer would be no.

(Pause.)

FRANCES: I'm waiting.

MARTIN: It needs to be an internal role. The champion, the leader on the quest for beauty has to be a full time, employee. As far up in the hierarchy as possible.

FRANCES: Me?

MARTIN: That would be ideal.

FRANCES: But I don't know how to do it. So, I would need the help of a consultant?

MARTIN: Which won't work.

FRANCES: That's certainly a dilemma.

MARTIN: Yes.

(Pause.)

FRANCES: And the solution?

MARTIN: I don't know.

FRANCES: Yes, you do.

MARTIN: No. I don't see a solution.

FRANCES: I hire you full time. A senior position. Something like Chief Learning Officer.

MARTIN: Oh. Or maybe Chief Beauty Officer.

FRANCES: No.

MARTIN: Corporate Muse?

FRANCES: No.

MARTIN: Vice President of Unity-in-Variety?

FRANCES: Vice President of Human Resources.

MARTIN: And Chief Learning Officer?

FRANCES: That could work.

MARTIN: That will work.

(Martin and Frances shake hands. Frances exits. Wanda enters.)

WANDA: The shit never ends.

MARTIN: I suppose not.

WANDA: There seems to be a GI bug going around the school. It comes on rather quickly and involves sudden onset diarrhea.

MARTIN: Yuck.

WANDA: So, that is a very literal "the shit never ends."

MARTIN: I don't know how you do it.

WANDA: I'm a nurse. Shit is part of the job.

MARTIN: I don't think I could do a job where shit was expected.

WANDA: There's shit in every job. Front line nursing is only different in that it is literal.

MARTIN: You think so?

WANDA: Yes.

MARTIN: I wonder what the shit will be in my new job.

WANDA: New job?

MARTIN: I'm the new Vice President of Human Resources and Chief Learning Officer.

WANDA: Any job with Chief in the title involves a lot of shit. Both on the giving and receiving ends.

MARTIN: I suppose.

WANDA: I think the key is to see the beauty in the shit.

MARTIN: Shit is disgusting.

WANDA: Sure, but it's also beautiful. Do you have any idea how much you can learn from someone's poop? The color, the consistency, it all tells a story. It tells you almost everything you need to know about someone's health.

MARTIN: Huh. I have never heard you talk about feces this way.

WANDA: It's been a long time since I've really been a hands-on nurse. I'd gotten away from the actual practice, from getting my hands dirty, so to speak.

MARTIN: You did wash your hands, didn't you?

WANDA: There's something magical in that direct connection, in the physical interaction with people, especially when they're sick. Especially when they're children. There're no barriers, no walls, just real interaction with other humans who are being humans.

MARTIN: I suppose.

WANDA: There's no pretense or any impression management when you have just had terrible diarrhea, and you haven't made it to the toilet. We're all past trying to impress the other person at that stage.

MARTIN: Dignity has gone down the drain.

WANDA: No. That's the whole thing. You still have to connect with the other person and show them that they still have basic dignity even if they are covered in their own shit and their gut feels like it's going explode.

MARTIN: I see.

WANDA: No, you don't. I'm not explaining it very well. There's really no words, it's this line you walk. You support them and help them, and see them as fully human and not as something disgusting, even if you're about to puke from the smell. And they get it. The kids know if you're disgusted. They know if you're patronizing. And when you get it right, there's real connection and it's beautiful.

MARTIN: That sounds nice, I guess.

WANDA: Nice? It's what I was missing. I was so busy dealing with all the metaphorical shit that I had lost touch with the beauty of the real thing.

MARTIN: I'm happy for you.

WANDA: Thanks. *(Pause.)* I love you.

MARTIN: I love you, too.

(Wanda and Martin exit together. KG, Dana, and Frances enter.)

DANA: I hear you've hired, Martin.

FRANCES: Yes, I have.

KG: A bold move.

FRANCES: Good HR leadership is hard to find. I figured it's worth a shot.

DANA: So, is he still all about beauty?

FRANCES: Of course.

KG: How long do you think that will last?

FRANCES: I hope it last forever. I really do.

DANA: I give it a month.

KG: I'll take that bet. I say more than a month.

DANA: Done. Frances can be the judge. I am looking forward to hearing how Martin handles having to deal with the real world.

KG: I think it will take a while for the real world to penetrate Martin's worldview.

FRANCES: And I hope it never does. At least not completely.

DANA: You're really rooting for him and all this beauty stuff?

FRANCES: That's why I hired him.

KG: It would be nice.

DANA: There's nothing like the bottom line to clarify the mind. Even Martin's beautiful mind.

(Dana, and KG exit. Martin enters.)

FRANCES: Are you getting used to the corporate life?

MARTIN: Slowly.

FRANCES: Not too slowly, I hope. So, what's your take on the staffing issue in marketing?

MARTIN: It's an issue.

FRANCES: And?

MARTIN: The turnover rate is clearly too high. But I don't know why that's the case in marketing particularly.

FRANCES: What are we going to do about it?

MARTIN: I'm not sure

FRANCES: Is this top of your priority list?

MARTIN: The Shalsey litigation has been taking up a lot of my time.

FRANCES: We'll settle. It will cost too much; we won't admit any wrong doing and it will be done. Let the lawyers handle it.

MARTIN: Don't you think it will have public relations implications?

FRANCES: Let our public relations firm handle that. We pay them enough. You need to deal with whatever the issue in marketing is.

MARTIN: Got it.

FRANCES: Good.

(Frances exits.)

MARTIN: Marketing. *(Pause.)* There's certainly no beauty there. Not that there couldn't be. Could I kill two birds with one intervention? Pursue beauty and figure out why the turnover rate is high? And what if the turnover rate is high exactly because people like me have been trying to figure out why it is so high? Or maybe it's something simple, like Dana being an enormous asshole? Even just a few days in and that much is clear to me. But it must be to Frances as well. *(Pause.)* So, perhaps the question is why Frances doesn't just fire Dana? We all know that culture comes from the leader and an asshole leader creates an asshole culture. An asshole culture will have higher turnover as people are assholes to each other and in turn they do what they need to, to escape. Could it be that simple? *(Pause.)* No, there has to be more going on. Unless, Frances is just looking for justification? There's no beauty in assholery. No unity-in-variety. *(Pause.)* I need to figure this out.

(Wanda enters.)

WANDA: I spent an inordinate amount of time today looking at butts. I spent the day looking at assholes. It seems that the custodians used the wrong cleaner on the toilet seats or they didn't rinse the seats properly or something and several children ended up with a rash around their assholes from the cleaner on the toilet seats. *(Pause.)* There's something beautiful about an asshole. It performs this amazing function and under most circumstances works remarkably well.

MARTIN: I have never thought about it that way.

WANDA: Spend a day looking at them and even you might come to appreciate the beauty.

MARTIN: Luckily, I don't spend my day looking at assholes. I just work with them.

WANDA: Maybe you need to step back and spend some time looking at them. Really looking, really paying attention. Like three hours just staring at a single asshole.

MARTIN: Like Dana, our VP of marketing?

WANDA: Whomever you wish. Your choice.

MARTIN: I wish I had the time.

WANDA: What else do you have to do?

MARTIN: Well, today I seemed to be up to my eyeballs in the Shalsey case. Did I tell you about that?

WANDA: Yes, you did.

MARTIN: Morally, I am sure that we are wrong. But I am also fairly sure that we are in the right legally.

WANDA: So, you want to fight the bad fight?

MARTIN: We have an obligation to the law.

WANDA: And not to higher moral values?

MARTIN: That's a question for the individual.

WANDA: And what about beauty?

MARTIN: That's a question for the ages.

WANDA: Is the Shalsey case beautiful?

MARTIN: No. It is perhaps grotesque. Maybe even a bit comic from a certain perspective, but I don't think there's anything about it that's beautiful.

WANDA: So, there you are.

MARTIN: Other than seeing the beauty in assholes, how was your day?

WANDA: It was fine. And other than finding a way to justify acting unethically, being completely devoid of beauty, and being surrounded by assholes, how was your day.

MARTIN: It sucked.

(Wanda exits. Frances and KG enter.)

FRANCES: Have you figured it out?

MARTIN: Figured what out?

KG: Marketing. What's the problem with Dana's division? Why the turnover?

MARTIN: Yes.

FRANCES: And?

MARTIN: It's Dana. Let me be clear here, this gives me no pleasure. I've known Dana for a long time. But it's a culture issue and that culture comes from Dana.

FRANCES: What is the issue?

MARTIN: Dana's an asshole.

KG: Sure, we all know that.

MARTIN: He has created an asshole culture.

FRANCES: What's the fix?

KG: Dana's always been an asshole. I don't see that changing.

MARTIN: Neither do I.

FRANCES: Then, the fix is clear.

MARTIN: It is?

KG: Fire Dana.

FRANCES: That's why you get paid the big bucks.

KG: And maybe you can do it beautifully.

(Frances and KG exit. Pause. Wanda enters.)

WANDA: Wow.

MARTIN: I don't want to fire Dana.

WANDA: So, figure something else out.

MARTIN: There isn't anything else.

WANDA: So, you're going to fire one of your oldest friends?

(Pause.)

MARTIN: Yep. That's what I'm going to do.

(Wanda exits. Dana enters.)

DANA: What can I do for you?

MARTIN: This isn't an easy thing.

(Pause.)

DANA: It feels like you're going to fire me.

MARTIN: I am.

DANA: Damn.

MARTIN: We've known each other a long time.

DANA: Damn. You bastard.

MARTIN: I'm so sorry.

DANA: You beautiful bastard. I did not think you had it in you. With all that talk about beauty I just didn't think you could do the dirty work.

MARTIN: Not everything can be beautiful.

DANA: No. This is ugly. This is evil. This is you stabbing me in the back.

MARTIN: You knew this was coming.

DANA: It's always a possibility.

MARTIN: Why do you think you're being let go?

DANA: You beautiful rat bastard. You're firing me and you're still playing therapist.

MARTIN: Sorry.

DANA: Frances has wanted to get rid of me for a while now. I think Frances hired you just to fire me. So, if I were you, I would be careful about what you do, you'll be next.

MARTIN: Why does Frances want to get rid of you?

DANA: Because I'm an asshole. That's how you would put it, right?

MARTIN: Yes. But I love you anyway.

DANA: Thanks. Fat lot of good that does me.

MARTIN: I suppose not. But it's true. You may be an asshole, but you're also a good person.

DANA: Thanks.
MARTIN: It's just not working here. You know that.
DANA: I do.
MARTIN: You'll land on your feet.
DANA: I will.
MARTIN: I am sorry.
DANA: Could you give Frances a message for me?
MARTIN: Sure.
DANA: Tell Frances, "Fuck you."

*(Dana exits. Wanda enters. Wanda looks at Martin. Wanda and Martin hug.
End of play.)*

About the author

Steve Taylor is a professor of leadership and creativity at the WPI Business School. His research is focused in two areas: organizational aesthetics and reflective practice. The former applies art-based scholarship and practice to management and organizations. The latter focuses on the ability to analyze our own actions and learn how to be more effective, ethical, and artful as managers and leaders. He is the author of the books: *Leadership Craft, Leadership Art; Staging Organization: Plays as Critical Commentaries on Workplace Life; Becoming the Leader You Want to Be: Using Reflective Practice for Root Cause Analysis in the Craft of Leadership; and Confessions of a Reluctant Leader and other musings from Organizational Aesthetics*. Steve is also a playwright, whose plays have been performed in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia, and the United States. He received a PhD in management from Boston College; an MA in performing arts from Emerson College; and a BS in humanities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.