



NATURAL SELECTION

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Natural Selection
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Selection

As expected, the lecture room groaned to the rafters with my colleagues, but I finally found a seat high in the amphitheatre in the middle of the row.

I recognized some of the people in the row and most nodded and smiled at me as I squeezed past them to my seat while some, mainly women, stared at me icily.

The seat was next to Tom who leaned close and whispered, ‘fancy seeing you here, Kari.’

‘And you,’ I said with a small grin.

Tom was an anthropologist on Professor Benson’s team and was, in my opinion, a nice man and did not strip me naked with his eyes every time I saw him – unlike some of the other Cro-Magnon males I had to work with. It was a pity Tom was married to the physicist Robin Smyth as I may have enjoyed a fling with him.

‘Thought I’d listen to see what they have to say, although Robin’s not that keen for me to go away for six months.’

‘Couldn’t she get on the team? I understand they want different disciplines.’

Tom shook his head.

‘No room for physicists apparently – they only want nature specialists.’

A hush fell over the room as Professors Marwick and Benson, together with a few people I did not recognise gathered at the front of the room.

The room dimmed and a slide of a tropical island filled the screen.

‘Arotunga Atoll,’ Professor Marwick proclaimed in a deep voice, ‘the site for the Marwick program.’

A small wave of murmurs swept around the amphitheatre as Professor Marwick regally looked around the room as we all stared at the picture.

‘Team Alpha is due to return in two months and we need to select the replacement team, Team Bravo, immediately.’

A ripple of excitement coursed through the room.

‘Two women and two men are required, ladies and gentlemen, to maintain the experiments and observations begun by the first team. Of course, there will be new experiments. Arotunga is untouched by human hand and is the perfect opportunity to observe the migratory patterns of birdlife, sea life and sea mammals as well as studying the unique botanical specimens.’

Professor Marwick lifted the introductory pack we had received when we entered the amphitheatre.

‘The skinny,’ he said in his Californian accent, ‘is in this! Please read the requirements and self-select yourself

– to be frank – most of you should select yourself *out* of the process! This is not for the faint-hearted! Six months of hard work and deprivation so it's not just about your professional qualifications as physical fitness is also vital!

He stared calmly at us and I felt my heart pound.

Could I do it?

Could I last six months?

I had dreamed of being involved in a field experiment like this – was this project my opportunity at last?

'Professor Benson will be handling the selection process,' Marwick said and Benson stepped forward.

'The first step is to complete the application form in your pack. You must answer *all* questions! Believe me, the committee will scrutinise each application. For most of you,' Benson said, staring calmly around the room, 'that is where the process will end. From previous experience, we assume that we will be interviewing only one candidate out of ten!'

Low whispers and my heart sank.

Only one out of ten gets through the first gate.

What hope did I have?

'For the mathematically inclined, that means we will have a possible pool of ten candidates from which we will select the final four. Good luck, ladies and gentlemen.'

Marwick and Benson walked out without a word with their assistants running after them.

‘Well,’ Tom said as we stood, waiting for the rest of the muttering row to move out, ‘it sounds exciting. Are you going to apply?’

‘I’ll think about it,’ I said. ‘You?’

Tom shook his head.

‘Nah, Robin would have a coronary if I pissed off for six months - especially with two women and another guy. The permutations would be interesting.’

He wriggled his eyebrows and I laughed.

I knew very well that Tom was deeply in love with Robin and wouldn’t think about straying. It’s what made him so nice and, yes, so damn attractive!

The thought of being involved in such a project would not leave me and I was browsing the information pack in the canteen when Steve waved at me as he entered.

I kept my eyes on the information pack – not really avoiding him – but hoping he would take the hint and slide in at one of the other tables.

Steve and I had dated for a two weeks when I first joined the institute. He was an ornithologist with a reasonable sense of humour and, I was lonely, in a new country and, I suppose, ripe for nice words and an easy smile.

The sex was boring – Steve thought he was inventive, thought he was some sex god but the truth was he was boring and conservative.

Worse, he was perfunctory.

Even worse, was his constant patter of inane comments which just wore me down and I could not take anymore. To top it all off, he was shorter than me – many men are – and *is* a turn-off. What woman wants a lover shorter than them?

I know I'm a prisoner of genetics but, let's face it, it's nice to look up at your lover, feel his strong arms around you...well, girls, you know what I mean!

It wasn't easy breaking off with Steve; I didn't know whether he was purposefully being dumb or just didn't get it but it had been a little nasty.

I remembered it well.

'Steve,' I had begun, 'we've been dating for two weeks...'

'Seventeen days.'

'Whatever. It's been nice...'

'Nice? Surely more than that?'

'Well, no, not really. I don't think this relationship is going anywhere...'

'How can a relationship seventeen days old *go* anywhere in that time?'

‘You can tell,’ I had said defensively. ‘Anyway, I think I don’t wish to continue...’

His face displayed a mixture of emotions, some I could not recognise but I did recognise disappointment and then anger.

‘You’re such an ice cold bitch, aren’t you?’

‘What?’ I was stunned. ‘I am not sure...perhaps my English is...’

‘We both know you speak English perfectly, with a slight accent, but it’s perfect. You’re dumping me?’

I had stared at him, bristling a little and simply said, ‘yes.’

‘Ok,’ he had said and that was, I thought, that.

I kept my head down, reading the information pack hoping he had sat somewhere else but, with a sinking heart, felt someone sit at the table.

‘Hello, Kari,’ Steve said.

I looked up, forced a cool smile and said, ‘hello Steve. How are you?’

He shrugged, reached over and tapped the information kit.

‘Are you applying?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You should. I am.’

Like me, Steve was a biologist but specialised in ornithology. He was top in his field and there wouldn’t be

many ornithologists who could match his experience so I guessed he would at least, get through to the interview.

‘I’m sure you’ll do well,’ I said automatically, hoping to cut the conversation short, ‘there’s not many that can match you...’

‘I know that,’ he said, interrupting, ‘but there are more important things to consider – if it was just qualifications, scientific papers and experience, you and I would be automatic selections – but it’s not. They consider a lot of other stuff.’

‘Like what?’ I asked, interested.

He stood up.

‘I don’t want to talk here,’ he said, looking around, ‘too many ears. Meet me at Rene’s at seven. We’ll have dinner and I’ll tell you.’

Was he stupidly trying to trick me into a date? Did he think I was that dumb?

‘Look,’ I said uncertainly, ‘Steve, it’s...’

‘You either want the info or you don’t,’ Steve said calmly, hands in his pockets, ‘if you’re not there by 7:15, I’ll order a bite to eat and that’ll be it. It won’t be the first time I’ve eaten alone.’

He turned and walked away without another word.

I watched him go. It was moments like this that reminded me why I broke off from him in the first place – he can be such an irritating little idiot!

He thinks my curiosity will overcome me and that I’ll turn up!

Of course, Steve was right and at seven-ten, I walked in and saw him reading the menu. Of course, I had purposely *not* dressed up and was still wearing the black jeans, blue top and sneakers that I wore to the Institute. The only thing missing was my white coat.

‘Curiosity got the cat,’ Steve said with a grin as I joined him. ‘Women are insanely curious,’ he said, almost gloating as I sat down, ‘female scientists insatiable.’

‘That is your theory,’ I said icily.

‘The tuna salad is fantastic.’

‘I *have* eaten here before,’ I said stiffly, looking around the restaurant.

‘We came here,’ he said gently and I met his eyes calmly.

‘Is that right?’ I said coldly, ‘I don’t recall,’ and he winced.

‘Can we be friends?’ Steve asked with an easy smile – too easy, I thought.

‘With an ice cold bitch?’

Steve sighed.

‘I was hurt and angry...’

He tailed off as the waiter arrived, all smiles and hand rubbing.

‘Have you seen the menus...’

‘I’ll have the tuna salad and spring water,’ I snapped, cutting him off.

‘I’ll have a medium rare steak and a Coors.’

‘Of course,’ the waiter said, glad to be gone.

I waited until we were alone again and smiled bleakly at Steve.

‘You say you have information?’

‘Don’t be suspicious.’

‘I prefer to use the word *cautious*. Either you have something or you do not. I suspect you don’t!’

‘You forget,’ Steve said evenly, ‘I’ve been at the Institute for over two years and have connections. You’ve been here seven weeks.’

‘And your *connections* tell you what?’

‘A lot,’ he said smugly and I sighed as the waiter returned with my water and Steve’s beer.

‘So you say,’ I said sipping the water. ‘Let me summarise. They will be selecting four people – one of the four will be the team leader – and the team will consist of two men and two women. The disciplines,’ I recited, ‘will be...’

‘Two will be biologists,’ Steve cut in, ‘one will be an ornithologist to continue the observations on the structure and classification of birds of Arotunga Atoll, and on their habits, song and flight. That,’ he said triumphantly, ‘would be me!’

‘You seem pretty sure of yourself...’

‘No one else in the Institute can touch me. If it was just qualifications and experience it would be just a formality that little Stevie Wise gets on the team!’

There it was; one of the things that irritated me about Steve was his tendency to speak of himself as another person.

Little Stevie Wise, indeed!

Well, apart from his lack of height, I thought maliciously, he's also short in other areas!

The waiter returned with the salads and I picked at it.

'If it's not qualifications...'

'I didn't say it wasn't,' Steve corrected me. 'Obviously, qualifications and experience play an important part but it's also compatibility with the other team members. Don't forget, the team will be alone on that island for six months.'

'Atoll,' I automatically corrected him, 'it's not an island, it's an atoll. Of course, compatibility would be important. You mentioned two biologists,' I said carefully, 'what is the other speciality?'

'Botany or, as *you* prefer to call it, plant biology. The brief will be to study the growth, reproduction, metabolism, development, diseases, and evolution of the plants of Arotunga Atoll.'

'That's impossible to achieve in six months,' I protested.

'Of course; the first team began the process, this team will continue the study as will the teams that follow.'

'I see,' I said carefully, mentally calculating who would be my competition for that position on the team.

‘There’s no one else,’ Steve said, calmly reading my mind.

‘I’m not so sure,’ I said hesitantly.

‘What? They wouldn’t choose the talented Norwegian botanist – sorry, plant scientist – Kari Olsen? Believe me, you’d be a natural selection, especially since your paper on those wild grains you love so much.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, stabbing a piece of tuna with my fork. ‘And the other two positions?’

‘Don’t worry about them,’ he said smugly, sipping beer.

‘Why?’

‘They’ve been selected.’

Stunned, I placed my knife and fork on the table.

‘But Professor Marwick said...’

‘He lied,’ Steve said calmly. ‘Kari, think about it. Why try to build a team from scratch and make sure everyone is compatible? They select the leader and make sure every one fits in with them!’

‘Do you know who they are?’

Steve shook his head.

‘No, but I do know the leader is female.’

I ran through possible candidates in my mind but couldn’t come up with one.

‘I also know one other thing, one very important thing,’ he said with a self-satisfied air, ‘about the first two.’

I waited but he just smiled at me. I couldn’t stand it.

‘What?’

‘They’re a couple.’

I wrinkled my brow.

‘So what?’

‘So what!’ Steve leaned forward and said in a low but earnest voice, ‘that’s our edge!’

‘Edge?’ I laughed and pushed my plate away. ‘How is that an edge?’

‘Let me explain it. What woman is going to allow *you* onto the team if you are not in a relationship?’

‘Me? I have the qualifications, you said so yourself...’

‘Forget that! You must know what you look like, Kari! When you played volley ball in your second week at the Institute, the guys wouldn’t stand up in the Mexican wave because they all had hard-ons!’

‘That’s disgusting!’

‘It’s true,’ Steve said equally. ‘Every red blooded guy here can’t take his eyes off you. They call you the Nordic Princess or the Ice Goddess. You’re tall, blond and beautiful with other large...eh..atributes.’

His eyes dropped to my chest and I scowled at him.

‘Not to mention extremely intelligent,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Let’s face it Kari, what woman is going to allow *you* on the island if you’re single. After a month, her guy will be following you around and you’ll be breaking up their relationship...’

‘I would do no such thing!’

‘You mightn’t be able to control yourself.’

‘Don’t talk idiocy!’

‘Well, maybe *you* have control, oh Ice Princess, but I doubt the guys would have. It’s a tropical island, Kari, you will wear a bikini and light clothes, right? What guy isn’t going to stare at you when you come out of the water or strut around in your shorts?’

‘This is ridiuclous,’ I said moodily but deep down, I knew there would be sexual tension.

Why do males have to be so randy all the time?

‘I have the answer.’ He signalled the waiter. ‘Do you want another drink?’

I shook my head and Steve ordered another beer.

‘No beer on Arotunga,’ he said wistfully, ‘so I’d better get my fill now.’

I waited silently and Steve smiled at me. The waiter returned with his beer and Steve raised it in a mock toast.

‘To Arotunga.’

I ironically half-raised my glass of water.

‘To Atolls,’ I muttered.

‘Do you want to know the solution? The way you and I can get onto that team?’

‘Am I going to be able to stop you?’

‘Don’t go frigid, Kari. I’ve identified the problem and I have the solution.’

‘I’m waiting.’

‘We – you and I – go as a couple!’

‘I knew it! This is some trick to...’

‘Hey, keep it down,’ Steve said urgently. ‘Look, we tell the interview panel we’re in a relationship and we’re on the team! No one will know the difference.’

‘Can I remind you,’ I hissed, ‘that we broke up?’

‘But they don’t know that,’ he said calmly. ‘You haven’t been dating, have you?’

‘Well...no, I’ve been immersed in my work...’

‘Couldn’t get over the old Stevie, eh?’ I scowled again and he blinked. ‘Well, they won’t know...’

‘You didn’t tell your friends, did you?’ I pounced. ‘They still think we are dating? You’re a *complete* idiot!’

He looked embarrassed.

‘I found it a...they would have laughed at me...letting someone like you go...they’d say you dumped me...and...I...never mind...’

‘I *did* dump you!’ I said savagely.

‘But no one knows. We tell them we’re a couple...’

‘I’m not going to lie...’

‘How ethical of you,’ he sneered. ‘Don’t worry, just complete your application and confirm we have a relationship. We’re friends and colleagues, aren’t we? *That’s* a relationship!’

‘And what happens if we are selected?’

‘On the island...atoll?’

I nodded.

‘Each member gets a separate room, we just get on with our work and, occasionally, we enjoy a fuck...’

‘Steve!’

‘What?’ he smiled. ‘I know your appetite, Kari, you’re a sexual being like everyone. Why not have a buddy – a fuck buddy – you can enjoy sex with no strings attached? I thought you Scandinavians were open about sex?’

I opened my purse and pulled out some notes.

‘This is for my meal...’

‘Hey, it’s my treat...’

‘No,’ I said stonily, ‘I pay my way.’

‘Will you think about it?’

I stood up.

‘Kari,’ he said urgently in a low voice, ‘I’m putting my application in tomorrow.’

‘Congratulations,’ I snapped.

‘Will you submit yours?’

I ignored him and walked away.

I live in a small apartment a few blocks south of the Institute in a large complex. It’s handy as I don’t have a car – something of a crime in America, I’ve discovered – so I can walk into the labs easily.

After leaving Steve at the restaurant, I worked out in the gymnasium that was part of the apartment block and, after a shower, completed the application form.

It took some time but I slept like a baby, happy that I had made the decision to, at least, apply.

As for Steve's scheme, I pushed it to the back of my mind, telling myself that I would face that when and if I was interviewed.

As I walked to the laboratory, I ran over the possibilities in my mind and suddenly felt a little defeated.

Why would they select me?

I'm not American, I've only been at the Institute for seven weeks and I had heard whispers that my American colleagues resented the fact that I got the position of Senior Researcher over an American.

My colleagues were not overly friendly and the only people that actually welcomed me were Tom and Robin.

And of course Steve.

Maybe that's why I went with him – I was just lonely!

I was lost in my work when Britney appeared at my elbow.

'It's Carol, isn't it?'

She knew my name, it was on my identification tag pinned to my lab coat but I smiled.

'Kari.'

'Oh, yes, silly me.'

She looked me up and down while I coolly waited.

'I suppose you're applying for a place on Professor Marwick's project?'

'What project?' I said, casually examining a grain sample.

‘I thought I saw you at the presentation.’

‘Oh that – yes, I went to see the fuss.’

‘Are you applying?’ Britney asked bluntly but did not give me a chance to answer. ‘You know that this is an *American* project?’

‘I haven’t considered all aspects yet,’ I said evenly. ‘Excuse me, Brinnie, I must return to my work.’

‘It’s Britney!’

‘Of course, my mistake,’ I said coldly.

Britney turned to walk away and then turned back, a harsh smile on her angular face, ‘you know, your English is ok, almost adult.’

‘So is yours, *almost*,’ I said, already peering into the microscope.