

THE TWO-DOLLAR FORTUNE

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On the first lunch hour of her first day at Peerless Paper Clips Incorporated, and on every lunch hour since, Abby went out onto Second Avenue and bought a *Times* to scour the Help Wanted section. Of course, it had been the Help Wanted section of the *Times* that had landed her in this particular frying pan, but that didn't mean she didn't have a shot at getting it right the next time and not landing in the fire. In the Big Apple, there was always hope for something better, even if New York was, as her family and friends in New Jersey told her, a dirty, dying city.

At twenty-two, Abby had fledged the nest of her small-town liberal arts college, and, along with the rest of the clutch of '78, had scratched about for employment. A B.A. in English was not the most practical of degrees, and almost every remotely related position required experience. So now, here she was, two weeks into her first job in New York. While the position was, technically, in her field (she was hired as a proofreader), the work itself was drudgery. From her brief interview with balding Joe Dewicke, the longtime president of Peerless Paper Clips, she hadn't quite understood that she'd be proofreading nothing but invoices. Hadn't Joe Dewicke mentioned that she might be proofing a newsletter and maybe even an article about the upcoming office supplies conference in Duluth? Not that she had expected to be reviewing Faulkner or Tolstoy at a paper clip company, but still, all she'd read so far was "40 packs pencils, 20 packs carbon paper, 80 packs paper clips," in twelve-point Courier font, with varying quantities and respective prices, over and over, nine to five, five days a week.

She struggled through the monotony. Not only was the work boring, but it was demoralizing as well, especially when each morning and afternoon she had to first ask—and then beg—the two haughty women in the typing pool to correct the errors they had made earlier in the day.

One typist was tall and dark, and the other was short and freckled. Both were full-figured and vibrant. Their clothes were layered, accessorized, and multi-hued in contrast to Abby's monochrome A-line skirt and drab sweater. When Abby faced

them, she could see herself as she imagined the typists saw her—her mud-brown hair pulled back too tight and her skin pale like that of some cave creature that never saw the sun. She felt like a nondescript misfit, a weed among colorful flowers.

"Do you see where it says 'carob paper'?" asked Abby, pointing to the bill she held in her hand. "It's supposed to say 'carbon.'"

"Who will notice? No one!" snapped the tall one, Martisha. Martisha was Jamaican, and her robust voice cut through everyone else's in the office. The weight of her smoothly coiffed hair bun tipped her head backward. The upward angle of her chin and the recalcitrant gleam in her eye put Abby in mind of Nefertiti, but with green-framed cat-eye glasses.

Tara, the short one, who had long lashes and a mane of pumpkin-colored curls, sighed loudly and glared as Abby placed the twenty typo-ridden invoices into the typists' inbox. Tara's silver bangle bracelets slid together with a clatter as she pulled an invoice from the pile and dragged her eyes over the corrections that Abby had marked. She twisted open a bottle of whiteout and jabbed the wet brush over the blunders. Abby watched, open-mouthed, as Tara stuffed the bill behind the platen of her blue Selectric, turned the platen knob to pull the invoice behind the ribbon, and pounded the keys to imprint new letters over the still-wet whited-out type.

"Tara, please try to understand. The whiteout has no effect on the carob—I mean the *carbon* paper copies below the top sheet." Abby cringed to hear her own voice, which to her sounded faltering and ineffectual. "I think you might remember my telling you and Martisha about this before?" Abby chided herself for using a questioning tone, since every day since she'd begun working at Peerless Paper Clips she had pleaded with Tara and Martisha to stop using whiteout.

"It's fine!" Tara cried as she flung the invoice into the outbox, the white layer, now dry, flaking off.

"Nobody cares!" Martisha chimed in. "What kind of crazy are you? How many times do you expect us to type these? One time is plenty!"

Martisha and Tara were not fond of Abby.

Abby suspected the two typists sometimes surreptitiously carried their invoices directly to the shipping department to keep Abby from seeing them at all, but she didn't search the shipping inbox for the un-proofed bills. She had to draw the line somewhere. Once or twice she even passed along the white-dabbed invoices to shipping herself, as if they were, in fact, unflawed—some days it was just too hard to keep fighting.

One lunch hour, instead of buying the *Times*, Abby went to a street fair. A table on Fifty-Third and Second displayed a placarded promise in seventy-two-point Helvetica: "FIND YOUR PURPOSE." A subtitle in smaller type said "Career Counselors Extraordinaire." Abby handed a wrinkled five-dollar bill to a fresh-faced young man, who gave her an evaluation form to take home and fill out. Weighing what she felt were her strongest assets, she carefully answered each question and mailed back the ten-page encapsulation of her soul and a check for \$19.95. Soon her true calling would be unveiled! Two weeks later, when a formal-looking missive arrived, Abby tore it open, hoping to discover her destined profession. The number-one suggested career was circus barker. Number two was psychoanalyst. Number three was secret service agent.

Abby began buying the *Times* again.

On her seventh Monday morning at Pee-less Paper Clips (as Tony, the young complaint mail coordinator, called it), Abby was feeling as if her stars had aligned against her. As she sank into her chair for another toilsome day, she noticed a new person in the office manager's glass-walled digs—the only office other than Joe Dewicke's. The previous tenant had been a petulant septuagenarian. No one knew where he had gone, but Tony divulged that "Old Riley," as everyone called him, was "off the wagon" again and wouldn't be coming back.

Old Riley's office was in Abby's line of sight, and Abby couldn't help but study the office's new occupant, who was, she assumed, the newly hired manager. She was dark-skinned and slim. Her gray suit looked slightly big, but its sleeves were too short, as if she hadn't found a good size for her on the rack. Her roughly cropped hair was clasped behind her ear with a chipped blue barrette. A misfit, like me, thought Abby.

When Tony introduced her to the staff, genuine smiles sprang up on each of her coworkers' faces. When it was Abby's turn to meet her, the new manager enfolded Abby's hand in greeting. Her accent was rich and lovely, like Martisha's (the newcomer, too, was Jamaican, Abby would later find out), but her voice, unlike Martisha's, was quiet, quelling for a moment the almost incessant undercurrent of Abby's anxiety.

Her name was Velena Wright.

Graceful and spare in her movement, the office manager was like the calm center of a hurricane. After the introductions, the staff went back to its usual noisiness while Velena Wright returned to Old Riley's office and leaned over the oak desk, perusing open notebooks. The afternoon sky and the office buildings

of Second Avenue's west side filled the window beyond her, a bright backdrop to her silhouette.

The next day when Abby arrived at work, Velena Wright was already poring over papers, as if she'd never left the office the night before. She held a pair of tortoiseshell glasses and seemed to be comparing a stack of invoices with a stack of orders—reviewing, Abby realized, Abby's own work. The manager stood, straightened her jacket, and walked toward the typists, an invoice and an order in each hand. Abby didn't hear what she said to the two women, but they were attentive as she spoke.

As Velena Wright turned away from the typists, Abby held her breath, sure that the manager would approach her next to say that she'd been remiss to let so many mistakes sneak through—after all, she, Abby, was the gatekeeper of good grammar, the purveyor of punctuation, and the warden of the word, though there were few words and there was almost no grammar to correct. But Velena Wright passed by Abby's desk, not even glancing at her, and returned to Old Riley's office, closing the door. Abby exhaled. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or offended.

The shorter typist, Tara, put her fists on her hips and glared at the closed door. "Who does she think she is?"

"Watch your mouth!" Martisha said in an icy tone. "Have some respect!"

Tara's eyes widened. She sucked in her cheeks, laid her long nails on the Selectric's keys, and didn't say another word. Even her bangle bracelets were silent.

That afternoon, when Abby picked up the first stack of corrected bills from the typists' outbox, she riffled through them as she walked to her desk, expecting to see the usual blotches and smears, but she didn't. For the first time, there was no whiteout. Abby peered into Old Riley's office and felt a rush of admiration for Velena Wright, who was once again bent over her desk, this time marking spreadsheets with a red pen.

Along with admiration, Abby felt shame that she had not been able to convince the typists to stop their sloppy practices. Abby was failing miserably at her job, and she knew it.

On Friday of the following week, the typists left at four, as usual. Soon afterward, Velena Wright rose from her desk and walked toward Abby, whose heart began to pump faster. "Oh, no," she muttered to herself. "Time for my reprimand." Abby lowered her eyes to her work.

"Abby?"

Abby looked up. The manager was standing a respectful dis-

tance from Abby's desk. Her arms were crossed, but she seemed far from stern. "May I speak with you in my office, please?"

Now that she was about to be fired, Abby felt a fondness for her first job in New York. No matter how much she disliked it, she didn't want it to end this way.

"Please sit, Abby." Velena Wright's voice was assertive but gentle as she closed the door behind her. "I'm sorry we haven't spoken much before now. It's nice to finally talk with you." She sat behind the oak desk.

Abby hadn't expected this kindness. "Nice to talk with you also."

"Abby, I saw from your résumé you have an English degree." The manager roundly enunciated each syllable.

"Yes. That's why I'm here—I thought proofreading would be. . . ." She didn't know what to say. She felt herself reddening.

"More interesting? A little less like a battle of wills?" Velena Wright laughed softly. "Abby, we need a new complaint mail coordinator. Tony's leaving—after only three months. Something's not right that we weren't able to keep him here longer." She tapped a Peerless Paper Clips pencil, eraser end down, against the desk blotter. "Would you like to write letters to customers? It would be a promotion. More money."

Instead of being fired she was being promoted? Abby could hardly believe her ears. She managed to stammer a yes.

"I'll tell Mr. Dewicke." Velena Wright smiled at her, a flicker of warmth in her eyes. "Thank you for accepting, Abby."

"Thank you, Miss Wright."

"Call me Velena."

"Velena."

Abby stood. She was about to return to her desk when she stopped. "And thank you for talking to the typists." Abby wanted to ask the manager what she had said to the women but didn't.

Velena blinked and folded her hands. "Did you try to talk to them yourself?"

"Yes," said Abby, again feeling the compunction of her fecklessness. "It didn't work."

"You will learn in time," said Velena, her voice smooth and comforting as hot honeyed tea.

That afternoon, Joe Dewicke called Abby into his office and offered her the promotion without mentioning Velena Wright, making it sound as if it had been his idea. The company would advertise for a new proofreader, whom Abby would train, and Abby would assume the complaint mail duties.

Several days later, as Abby was cleaning out her desk, she noticed that Velena was in Mr. Dewicke's office, speaking to him

quietly. At first, he was staring at Velena, listening, but soon he scrunched his eyes, shaking his head. Abby couldn't hear what Velena was saying, but she heard every one of Joe's responses: "We don't have the money to upgrade!" and "Our pencils are fine just the way they are!" And the last thing he said—in a kind of rumbling bellow, was: "Maybe we just have one too many bossy Jamaican women around here!"

If Velena answered him, Abby didn't hear it. The manager slowly turned her back on her boss. She walked away from him and into her own office—her coworkers thought of it as *her* office now—and stood at her window. Straight-backed and still, she stared out at Second Avenue. Her shoulders rose and fell in what looked to Abby like a sigh or an intake of breath.

Finally, Velena turned away from the sunlit glass. She pulled her jacket from the back of her chair and laid it over the crook of one arm. She lifted her briefcase from the desk and slid the case's strap over her right shoulder. Keeping her eyes straight ahead, she left her office, crossed the floor to the company's frosted-glass double doors, and walked out of Peerless Paper Clips.

Abby wanted to follow Velena out those double doors. But she remembered the rent, due that Friday, and didn't.

The next morning, crotchety Old Riley was behind his former desk in Velena Wright's office.

Though Abby had spoken with Velena only a handful of times, her absence made Abby feel lonelier than ever.

The typists began using whiteout again.

Joe Dewicke told Abby there was a change of plans. Abby would be promoted to complaint mail coordinator, but she'd continue to proof the invoices too. And the raise would have to wait.

"But—"

"Don't bellyache about it. That's the way it's going to be, Abby. Just be glad you have a job."

From across the room, Tara smirked at her.

Abby *was* glad she had a job—she had to keep the money coming in, even if she barely made enough to pay her bills and keep herself and her cat fed—but she wished that it wasn't *this* job she was dependent on. Circus barker was sounding better and better.

Days passed. "Tony, when are you going to show me how to deal with the complaint mail?"

"Don't worry, there's plenty of time before I leave," Tony replied.

Tony took nine minutes of his last day at the company to school Abby in the daily convolutions of the job he'd dubbed the most excruciatingly tedious twelve weeks of his waking existence.

His main instruction concerned the name she should use when signing any complaint correspondence or speaking to a customer.

“Your name is Lee LaRosa,” said Tony. “Just remember that. Whatever you do, you can’t let anyone know your real name.”

“Why not?”

“Honey, trust me. You do *not* want these people knowing that you, personally, have anything to do with selling them yet another box of pencils that all break the first time they set sharpened point to paper. And don’t even get me started about the so-called erasers.”

“I won’t get a new name?”

“I don’t think so. I’m sure they’re trying to stretch this alias out for as long as they can. If you’re still here the next time Peerless Ps gets sued, then maybe they’ll kill off Lee LaRosa and give you a new identity.”

Good training for my secret agent career, Abby thought.

Clutching the requisite two balloons and small red box handed to all departees from Peerless Paper Clips, Tony slipped out through the company’s frosted-glass double doors hours before five o’clock and left Abby to slog alone through her first fifteen letters from customers.

What struck her about the letters’ content was their remarkable consistency. It seemed as if *all* the pencils broke *all* the time. As she reviewed the backlog of orders, Abby realized that there might actually be one complaint letter per invoice—was that possible? And the bonus gift—the so-called gold pocket watch that customers received for free with any bulk order of two hundred dollars or more—rarely functioned and apparently often didn’t even survive its shipping, so there were complaint letters about the watches too. But it was the fifteenth letter that set her teeth on edge. The customer complained that the product he’d purchased had, like a vampire, “disintegrated upon exposure to sunlight,” but he offered that perhaps the fault was his own because, according to the bill included in the package, he had “apparently ordered not ‘carbon paper’ but ‘carrion paper.’”

Even more challenging than her complaint mail duties was the hour each day when she answered the company’s main phone lines so that the receptionist, Alondra, could take her lunch hour—another duty that Joe Dewicke, like some evil stepmother, had assigned to Abby after Velena left. Now Abby had three jobs.

The receptionist, who constantly amazed Abby with her agility in seamlessly sustaining a phone conversation with a friend despite dozens of incoming customer calls, each of which she answered promptly and with perfect equanimity, would walk over

to Abby's desk every day at noon and say, "Okay, Sweetie, time to play receptionist again."

Alondra had it right. Abby was definitely *playing* receptionist, as she had no idea how to use the phone system. Alondra never bothered to explain how to transfer a call or put a person on hold, except to say, "If you cut them off, they always call back."

Three weeks passed. One day Abby was operating the phones when all twelve lines lit up at once. She panicked and punched each one in quick succession, saying, twelve times, to whomever was on the other end of the line, "Peerless Paper Clips, please hold. Peerless Paper Clips, please hold. Peerless Paper Clips, please hold..." When she punched each button a second time to speak to her deferred callers, she realized, with a sick thud in her chest, that she'd already hung up on every single one of them. Two minutes later, they all called back, again all at once. Abby answered each call and repeatedly pushed a button she thought might be the hold button but was not, and, one more time, disconnected every caller.

Abby then shoved the phone aside and arranged a stack of invoices and a stack of orders on the blotter in front of her—she was getting behind in her proofreading work and decided to review bills in between phone calls. She was checking her sixth invoice when the phone rang. She lifted the receiver and said, "Twenty packs carbon paper."

"Actually, that's what I'm calling about!" said the woman on the other end of the line. "Where *are* my twenty packs of carbon paper?"

"I imagine they're on their way," said Abby. When the phone rang again, Abby said, "Please hold" and hung up on the woman to answer the next incoming call. And that call was, finally, the first one that Abby successfully transferred. She was feeling proud of herself—even though a slip of the finger caused her to transfer the call not to the shipping manager as she'd intended but to the Hot Chop Chinese Restaurant on the corner (everyone in the office ordered from Hot Chop, and the receptionist had placed the number on speed dial)—so that when the phone rang once more, Abby had answered it with a confident lilt as she chirped "Peerless Paper Clips" into the receiver.

"Lee LaRosa please," said a stern male voice.

Abby froze. No one had told her what to do if she, as the receptionist, received a call for herself as the complaint mail coordinator. She considered hanging up but remembered Alondra's dire prediction, which she knew now to be true—*they always call back*.

Abby held her nose. "One moment please." She realized she

must have unconsciously been trying to sound like Lily Tomlin's Ernestine, the only phone operator besides Alondra that Abby was familiar with. Since she hadn't figured out how to put someone on hold, Abby placed the phone close to the speaker of the boom box that sat on the reception desk, hoping the oldies station would give the impression of canned hold music. She considered trying out her newly found transferring skills to beam the call to someone else in the office or maybe even to the Hot Chop Chinese restaurant.

"Lee LaRosa, please!" the man on the line shouted over the tenor singing "From a Jack to a King."

The country song gave Abby an idea. She grabbed the receiver, and even though she hadn't a Southern bone in her body (unless she counted South Brunswick, New Jersey), Abby pulled from her Saturday-night Million-Dollar Movie memories an accent modeled after Scarlett O'Hara. "Why, hello, sir, this is Lee LaRosa here. May I help you?" There was silence on the other end of the phone. "Why, I declare, sir, I am *so* sorry I didn't pick up your call right off the bat, and I surely would love to help you with any little thing you need."

"This is Lee LaRosa?"

At least she hadn't accidentally cut him off. Another first. "Why, yes, sir, sho' 'nuff it is!" Abby saw Martisha glance in her direction and roll her eyes. She didn't blame Martisha. Not one iota.

"There must be some mistake." The man's words faltered. "The last time I spoke to Lee LaRosa, he was a man."

Abby winced. Not having a clue how to respond, she said, "Well, sir, as you might have noticed, there's been a change." And she slammed down the phone, not caring one whit that they always called back.

Hanging up—intentionally—felt both reckless and empowering, as if she were breaking the connection to everything she no longer wanted, as if she'd ripped out a messy old sheet of paper from her typewriter and rolled in a new blank page.

On her lunch hour, she passed by the newspaper stand, feeling too restless to face the Help Wanted section. She walked four blocks north, wanting to walk into another city, another state, another life. Above a brownstone doorway, a sign spelled out "Psychic Sarah, Queen of Karma" in pink neon script. An arrow spitting phosphorescence pointed upward, and a small paper sign taped to the doorjamb read "Sale \$2." Abby stopped and climbed the dark steps.

In the second-floor bay-windowed room, Psychic Sarah took a drag from her cigarette, crossed her legs, and grabbed Abby's hand, turning it palm up and squinting at it through her exhaled

smoke. "Your fortune is about to change. Take the opportunity. Might not sound like much at first, but don't discount it—saying yes will lead to better things." She dropped Abby's hand. "Five dollars."

"The sign said two," said Abby.

Psychic Sarah tapped the ash off her cigarette and leaned deeper into her velvet-upholstered chair. "Five, or you won't get your good fortune." She took another hissing drag and blew the smoke in a perfect ring that floated toward Abby.

"I doubt that," said Abby in a quiet, even voice, the way Vele-na Wright might have said it. "You saw my fortune already." She held up her hand to the smoke circle, dispersing the ring into an innocuous wisp. "Right here in my palm." She reached in the side pocket of her purse and pulled out two dollar bills, which she placed on top of the scarf-covered table. She stood, turned her back on Psychic Sarah, and stared straight ahead as she walked down the steps, through the doorway, and out into the brightness of the street.

A block south, at a vendor's table, Abby paid three dollars for a string of turquoise stones. "I'll wear it," she said, waving away the vendor's offer of a paper bag. Striding down Second Avenue, she kept glancing at her wrist, glad to see something colorful there.

Back at work, she collected the typists' pile of corrected invoices, and, as always, on her way to her desk she thumbed through the stack, seeing the usual mottle of whited-out type. She stopped. She turned around and walked back to the typists, and the movement of their fingers ceased as they lifted their eyes from their work to watch Abby approach.

"Martisha, Tara, I know you don't want to be here. Neither do I. But for right now, this is the only job we've got. So, let's just try to help ourselves and help each other, and maybe one day we can all find something better." She placed the invoices back in their inbox. "Please fix these. Thanks." She turned and walked to her desk.

Behind her, Abby heard Tara's agitated bangle bracelets.

"Why is she so high and mighty all of a sudden?" Tara huffed.

"Hush!" Martisha said.

Astonished, Abby felt grateful for Martisha's rebuke of Tara's scorn but pretended she had not heard it.

An hour later, Abby walked again to the typists' outbox. She picked up the latest invoices and began to flip through them as she returned to her desk. She sat down and leafed through them again, this time more slowly. There was no whiteout. Not a speck.

As he passed by, Joe Dewicke tossed two letters onto her invoice pile. “New clients. We want to impress them, Abby. Send each of them two cartons of paper clips as a thank-you gift.”

“If you want to impress them,” said Abby, “don’t send them paper clips.”

Joe Dewicke frowned and opened his mouth but said nothing. Walking away, he mumbled over his shoulder, “Send them ten boxes of paper.”

“I can’t send our carbon paper—it self-destructs. The erasers are worse than useless. And all the pencils crack in two. Maybe we just have one too many broken pencils around here!”

Joe Dewicke turned on his heel. “I want to see you in my office!”

“Good,” Abby said. “I want to see you in your office too. I need to give you my two weeks’ notice.” The typewriters went silent. Abby’s phone rang twice.

Joe worked his jaw. “Answer it!” He stomped away and slammed his office door.

Abby let the phone ring two more times before she picked it up. “Peerless Paper Clips, Lee—” No, she thought, no more pretending. No more wavering. “Abby Whitlock speaking.”

“Abby! You’re using your own name!”

“Tony?”

“Abby, how would you like to use your own name all the time? How would you like to work someplace else?”

Could she be hearing correctly? “Tony, what do you mean?”

“They’re hiring at my new job—it’s a trade journal about cats—*Frolicking Felines*.” He coughed. “It seems I’m always plagued by alliteration. Anyway, I’m a salesman now.” The background noise became muffled—he had, Abby assumed, cupped the phone’s mouthpiece with his hand. “It’s okay here, Abby—really it is. Much better than Pitiful P Clips.”

“Oh, Tony. I don’t think I could be a salesman.”

“Not a salesman. You want to be an editor someday, right?”

Abby had never revealed that to Tony. Abby had never revealed that to anyone, and she had lost hope of it. But the late-day sun streamed through the Second Avenue window of Velena’s old office, and the beam almost reached Abby’s desk. “Yes, that’s exactly what I want. But how did you—”

“The opening is for an editorial assistant.”

A way out. A light at the end of the typewriter carriage. “Tony! I want the job!” A thought occurred to her. “Do you think they might need an office manager?”

“They just hired one.”

Abby was surprised at her disappointment. “Oh. Okay. I was hoping we might try to find Velena Wright and ask her to apply.”

“She did apply. She’s the new office manager. She asked me to call you. And she said to give you a message. She said to tell you—and I quote: ‘You are greater than the many indignities piled upon you.’”

Abby smiled. “Yes, I am.”

Two weeks later, on her last day at Peerless Paper Clips, she handed her stack of complaints and her *nom de plume* to the new Lee LaRosa, a Filipino man in his mid-thirties. Abby then followed her predecessor’s example and departed the job she’d always remember as the most excruciatingly tedious twelve weeks of her waking existence. And, like Tony, she slipped out several hours early through the frosted-glass double doors with the usual two balloons and small red box containing, she discovered, as she opened it on the subway, the Peerless Paper Clips complimentary “gold” pocket watch—a watch that she was certain would (in the words of one of her former customers) “not run worth a damn.”

Turning over the timepiece, Abby read the words etched in Edwardian script on the watch’s metallic back: “Goo Fortune.” She laughed out loud. The dropped “d” seemed like Psychic Sarah’s karmically comic payback, but Abby knew it was simply the last lapse—the final flub—of Peerless Paper Clips that she would ever have to face.

Abby walked up the subway stairs into the warm afternoon. Had her lucky break been fate? Or had she also had a hand in setting her own stars in her favor? She wasn’t sure, but either way, Abby said yes to her good fortune as it greeted her—typos and all.