

FS FICTION

P & ME

ONE NEWLY MINTED FSO LEARNS MORE THAN
SHE BARGAINED FOR IN AN UNUSUAL A-100 EXPERIENCE.

BY MARY GRACE MCGEEHAN

Whatever else anyone might say about me, it's a safe bet that no one ever learned more from their Foreign Service mentor than I did. I wrote down some of these lessons in my diary before my mentor told me never to keep a diary in Washington. That was one lesson. Here's another: To get to the top, you have to be kind of a jerk, but not too much of one. Another one: 95 percent of the seventh floor's attention is devoted to 5 percent of the world.

One unusual thing about these lessons is that they were delivered not over watery, overpriced turkey sandwiches in the State Department cafeteria but at my mentor's house near the National Cathedral. Another unusual thing: this

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take on the department leadership came not from, say, a burned-out consular officer but from the under secretary of State for political affairs. Or, as everyone in the Foreign Service knew him, P.



We were assigned our mentors a few weeks into A-100. Like boys brought in for a dance at a girls' school, they filed in and stood along the sides of our classroom. Halfway into this, Gray, my only A-100 friend, leaned over and muttered, "Seventh-floor sighting at eight o'clock." I looked over my left shoulder and there was P, who had addressed our class the week before. He was in his early 40s, with brown hair, and was wearing a blue pinstriped suit. In other words, he looked like any other FSO. Except, of course, he wasn't. In the State Department, he was the Alpha Male.

As the woman from Human Resources ran through the match-ups, my classmates pretended to be pleased as they were paired with aviation specialists, post management officers and deputy office directors. Everyone was waiting to see who got the prize. The tension rose as the field of potential P mentees got smaller, like at the Miss America contest when they list the runners-up and the remaining contestants are thinking, "Am I going home wearing that tiara, or will I not even be third runner-up?" Except for me. After only a few weeks in the Foreign Service, I had

developed just one goal: to be ignored. It figured, then, that with five or six people remaining, they called my name along with P's. As a buzz arose in the room, the only voice I heard distinctly was that of Amanda, my arch-enemy, saying, "Oh, wouldn't you know."

P and I chitchatted awkwardly as we headed to the FSI cafeteria. Where was I from? Westchester. Cone? Political. College? Georgetown. I didn't have anything to ask him, since Amanda, who had finagled the responsibility of introducing him to the class, had done so at considerable length. I knew that he had joined the Foreign Service right out of college, that his overseas postings included Bonn, Cairo and Jerusalem, and that he was the youngest under secretary ever. Amanda hadn't mentioned a wife and children.

In the cafeteria, he took in the long line of people waiting to get trays and silverware and looked at his watch. "How about if we go over to the department?" he asked. Fifteen minutes in a Lincoln Town Car later, we were in the eighth-floor dining room. An hour after that, when my classmates had long since finished what in many cases turned out to be not just their first but also their last encounter with their mentors, we were still talking. The meal was not much better than the usual department cafeteria fare, but neither of us paid much attention to the food.

Over the next two weeks, we met for after-work drinks at Kinkead's, dinner at the Old Ebbitt Grill and a ballet at the Kennedy Center. All through the ballet, we kept looking at each other and smiling. As he was dropping me off at home, he looked into my eyes and said, "Would it be all right if I ..."

"Yes?" I asked.

"... If I asked the ethics office if mentor and mentee fall into the category of prohibited romantic relationships?" he asked.

It wasn't the most romantic overture I'd ever received, but at least I knew where I stood. I said yes, the lawyers gave us their blessing, P resigned officially as my mentor, and we were off and running. Or, more precisely, off and walking.



It would have taken a much more grounded person than I not to be swept away. I mean, think about it. I was 24, in A-100, living in a group house, and he was ... well,

he was P. Somehow, though, I got the idea that the way to hold onto him was to be unavailable. Or, rather, to act unavailable. In truth, I was as available as sand on the beach. But I acted like Doris Day, occasionally turning down dates because of made-up schedule conflicts and claiming every single night that I had to get up early the next morning. It was all an act, of course — I was a normal 21st-century girl, not Tess of the d'Urbervilles.

What did we talk about? Pretty much the same things I'd talked about with guys at Georgetown. The Middle East. Whether sanctions work. The idiotic editorial in that morning's *Post*. The difference was that these conversations took place not at G.U. student hangouts like the Tombs, but at Washington power-broker hangouts like Café Milano. And instead of hanging out with his fraternity brothers, we ran into people from his crowd: the *New York Times* globalization guy, the deputy national security adviser, and the head of the Senate's Asia subcommittee.



Meanwhile, back in A-100, the knives were out. They had been from day one, when I stood up along with everyone else and did my two-minute, all-about-me presentation. I'd emphasized my international relations major and my interest in Third World conflicts and glossed over my previous employment, muttering something about having done a little acting. After we all finished, Gray asked me what I'd acted in, and I told him the name of the hospital soap opera I'd had a small part on for the past year. "Oh, my God!" he yelled. "I knew you looked familiar! You're Nurse Melanie!" By the time the break was over, everyone knew.

I hate telling people I used to be on television. There are only two possible reactions. The first one is, "How could you leave?" A surprising number of my classmates took this line. It made no difference that Gray was the only one who had ever actually seen the show. No one bought my explanation about how long and exhausting the hours were, how the pay wasn't all that great, and how the work was basically meaningless. "But you were on television," they protested.

I could understand this if I'd left the soap for a job at, say, a bowling alley, but here I was working for one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, more or less

guaranteed a long, stable career doing things that, at least in theory, could make the world a better place. I was a little disturbed about what this said about our culture. In any case, Nurse Melanie had probably been just months away from getting a fatal disease or dying in a car accident. They go through nurses like Sani-Wipes at that hospital. A few people end up with permanent roles, but I was no great shakes as an actress and not pretty enough for that to be disregarded.

The other reaction I get is, “Oh, really? I’m not familiar with that show. I don’t watch much television.” This line, delivered in a fake-apologetic tone, is common in Washington. Amanda and a few of her acolytes — she was already consolidating her power base as de facto class leader — fell into this camp. So did our A-100 coordinator, Pamela Groebler, whose goal in life was to make us into serious, mature FSO types who would not embarrass her by singing the “Gilligan’s Island” theme song on the shuttle bus or wearing leopard-print miniskirts and flip-flops to the Operations Center, to name (as she often did) two of the sins of the class before us.

Luckily, I had Gray. He was our class expert on the Foreign Service, having spent two years in Vienna when his boyfriend, David, was a cultural officer there. Gray had taken the high school choir he directed to Austria over spring break, met David at an embassy reception, and never gone back to Kansas City.



A few weeks into the P thing, which in an uncharacteristic fit of discretion I hadn’t told Gray about, he and I were sitting in the FSI cafeteria a few tables away from Amanda and her coterie. I was whining, as usual, about how everyone just

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thought of me as Nurse Melanie. Gray looked around to make sure no one was listening, leaned toward me, and whispered, “If you don’t watch yourself, you’re going to *wish* everyone thought of you as Nurse Melanie.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“As opposed to, say, P’s new entry-level cookie.”

“How did you know?”

“Come on, how dumb do you think I am? I mean, the ballet. The guy works 16 hours a day. His executive assistant, who’s a friend of David’s, hasn’t seen his kids in two months. What else would he be doing at ‘The Rite of Spring?’”

“I’m sorry, I was going to tell you,” I said. “It’s just that I still can’t really believe it. I mean, why me? He could go out with anyone.”

“Yet, unfathomably, he passes up hundreds of women who think that a buttoned-up Oxford shirt with a long string of pearls is an acceptable fashion choice, in favor of a blond former actress. It does boggle the mind.”

“Oh, come on,” I said. “It’s not like the men in the State Department are any better dressed. Someone needs to tell them that ‘washable’ is not the most desirable quali-

ty in a suit.”

“Too true, but irrelevant to this discussion.”

“We’ve been discreet,” I said.

“Well, it’s out there. David heard some mid-level CDOs talking about it on the shuttle bus yesterday. If you don’t think Amanda and her evil minions are 10 seconds away from catching on, you’re nuts. You don’t understand how small the State Department is. It’s like a high school.”

“So, what, I shouldn’t see him anymore?”

“No. Do whatever you want. Just don’t complain when no one takes you seriously.”

“Why? I don’t see what my social life has to do with my career. And I’m as qualified to be an FSO as anyone else. I won an award for my thesis about ...”

“That’s another thing. Blathering on about the balance of power in the Caucasus isn’t going to win friends and influence people. Haven’t you noticed that no one else around here ever actually talks about foreign policy?”

Some classmates joined us and we hastily changed the subject to the bid list, a topic of obsessive interest to everyone. I didn’t have a chance to talk to Gray for the rest of the day and I went home feeling like I didn’t have a friend in the Foreign Service, besides P, of course, and look where that had gotten me. In any case, things seemed to have cooled down lately on that front. Between two cancellations from him because of foreign policy emergencies and one fake schedule conflict from me, we hadn’t seen each other in more than a week.

Maybe I should just give it all up and go back to the soap opera, I thought. They hadn’t killed off Nurse Melanie when I left, just sent her off to Canada to look for her birth mother. I’d heard that my successor,

Nurse Tracy, was having trouble memorizing her lines. I was about to pick up the phone to call Clayton, my best friend on the show, who had managed to hold down the small part of Orderly Tyrone for over 10 years, when the SMS signal on my cell phone beeped. The message from Gray read: "Come over and share the secrets of your girlish heart." Half an hour later, I arrived at the fancy Penn Quarter condo building where he and David lived.

Gray was sitting on the sofa with a steaming towel around his neck, drinking hot lemon tea. He waved but didn't say anything. "The Washington Chorus is doing Beethoven's 'Ninth' with the National Symphony tonight, so he's saving his voice," David said, rolling his eyes. David didn't share Gray's musical tastes. He and some Foreign Service friends had a not-very-good punk

band called the Bilateral Irritants. The voice-saving did seem like overkill, since the chorus had 200 members and Gray didn't have a solo.

Gray pointed at me, made a sign-language P, and gave a thumbs-up. "He says he thinks it's great about you two," David said. I could have figured that out. Then Gray made a pained face. "He's sorry if he acted like a jerk. It's just that he's worried that you're going to get hurt. Not by P, but by all of the people in the Foreign Service who have nothing better to do than trash people they're jealous of." That seemed like a lot to read into one grimace. Presumably, he and David had discussed this earlier.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Don't worry, we have a plan," David said.

"To get people to take me seriously?" I asked.

"No. The trick is *not* to take yourself seriously. You have to embrace your inner Nurse Melanie. You have public speaking training coming up, right?"

"That's right. We're supposed to explain how to do something. My speech is on 'How to Mediate an International Conflict.'"

"Not anymore it isn't," David said. "Here's what you're going to do."



A week later, I was standing in front of 20 classmates in my soap opera costume. Unlike real-life nurses these days, who look like they're wearing children's pajamas, Nurse Melanie wore a proper uniform with a white dress and a little starched cap. I, of all people, shouldn't have been nervous in front of a camera, but I felt an unfamiliar fluttering in my

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stomach as Bill, our instructor, said, "Action!" and the red light went on.

"I'm not a nurse, but I played one on TV," I said. "And I'm here to share some lessons we learned at Suburban General about how not to run a hospital." Suddenly I was Nurse Melanie again, saying my lines, and I was fine.

"Rule No. 1," I said. "Don't attempt to administer anesthesia when you're drunk." Gray hit the PowerPoint remote and a still came up showing Dr. Robert Giles with his head in his hands as he stood in front of a lifeless patient. I continued with my advice. Don't hire people who claim to be doctors without checking their medical credentials. Don't take on your husband's secret love child as a psychiatric patient.

It worked. There was applause and laughter as I finished the last rule, "Don't get into fistfights during surgery." This was accompanied by a

After the class quieted down, Bill said, "Well, I clearly have nothing to teach Nurse Melanie about public speaking."

video of Nurse Melanie lying on the floor being pummeled by Nurse Julie, who erroneously suspected Melanie of having an affair with her fiancé, rich bad-boy Rory Hathaway.

After the class quieted down, Bill said, "Well, I clearly have nothing to

teach Nurse Melanie about public speaking."

Then Pamela Groebler, who must have walked in during my presentation, stood up in front of the class. "That is not what I had in mind for a class on public speaking in the Foreign Service," she said.

The room fell into a glum silence as Marnie Watkins, who had grown up on an organic farm in Iowa, took the floor to tell us about chemical-free ways to get rid of aphids. In the back row, Amanda was smirking.



As we lined up for the shuttle after class, I said to Gray, "Thanks for nothing. That was excruciating. I'm going back to New York."

"Are you crazy?" he answered. "You killed! You succeeded beyond my wildest dreams."

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I said, "Pamela Groebler hates me. What's so triumphant about that?"

Marnie came up to us and said, "Don't listen to what that witch says. No one can stand her." She really said "witch." I guess that's how people talk in Iowa.

Sophie Thurston, who used to work at the U.S. Trade Representative's office, got in line behind us. "I heard that they parked her over here in orientation because the Secretary didn't want to see her face after she screwed up those Latin American trade negotiations," she said.

As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, Gray started humming atonally.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Shh, I'm finding the key." A few notes later, he started singing, "Just sit right back and hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip..." By the time we pulled out onto Arlington Boulevard, the bus rang with the sound of 50 voices singing, "If not for the courage of the fearless crew, the *Minnnow* would be lost." Even Amanda joined in. For someone who supposedly never watched TV, she had an excellent grasp of the lyrics.



As we got off at C Street, I asked Gray if he wanted to go out and celebrate.

"No," he said. "There's one more thing you need to do." P had just returned from a weeklong trip to the Middle East. I hadn't heard from him the whole time. I'd confessed to Gray how much I missed him — P the person, not just the excitement of being swept up in his world. I was tired of playing games.

"You're right," I said. Still wearing my nurse's uniform, I went into the department, got into the elevator, and pushed seven.

That day, for the first time anyone could remember, P left work on time. ■

