

LOVERLESS LOVE

As the marketing director of a top-20 symphony orchestra located in the Midwest, I had my hands full. The orchestra was running a \$1 million deficit every year, steadily declining ticket sales one of the root causes.

Other than the CEO, the two individuals most responsible for income were me, Daniel Gregory, and Geraldine Hayward, the fundraising director. I had been with the orchestra for twelve years when she came aboard in 1995. We were both single, and before long our relationship became a very well-hidden affair. But this story is about Tina Hawthorne. Consider Geraldine a supernumerary who never actually has any lines in the opera.

I met Tina at the national conference of the American Orchestra League held late spring in New York City, her home. Tina was one of the two most-sought-after marketing consultants in the field. I'd heard of her work, and her successes, for years, and only because of our dire situation was I finally able to convince our CEO to let me try to engage her services. At this point, her six-figure fee was inconsequential in the face of our impending financial disaster.

Before leaving for the conference, I called her, and we made an appointment for coffee late the first day of the conference in the lobby of the Marriott on Broadway.

I arrived on time and grabbed us a table. I ordered black coffee and sat reading the conference catalogue, waiting for her to arrive.

An hour later, she called my cell and said, "It's Tina. Where are you?"

I told her, struggling to keep any irritation out of my voice.

"Is that where we were to meet?" she asked, genuinely confused.

"Yes," I said, "Where are you?"

"I'm in the Starbucks next door, like we agreed!"

I knew she was tough to engage, so I let it go. "I'm sorry. My mistake. I'll be right over."

"Hurry, please. I only have fifteen minutes."

Reluctantly, I asked, "Do you want to reschedule?"

"Not if you ever want to see me again," she said, laughing.

"I'll be right there!" I said, grabbed my satchel, thinking, is she always like this?

I saw only one young woman in the cafe. I went up to her and said, "Tina?"

"Yes, it's me. Before you sit down, please let me apologize. I only meant you might not see me again because my schedule is so full. I wasn't trying to be rude."

"I completely understand," I said and held out my hand.

We shook and she said, "I got you a latte with cinnamon. I hope that's okay."

"That's fine," I said, as I settled in. I hated lattes, and this one was cold.

"It's iced," she said, though it wasn't in a plastic cup.

Had she just fibbed, I wondered?

"Great. Thanks," I said, "I'll get the next one."

She looked at her watch and shook her head, causing her hair to fall off her shoulders.

"No time for that. How can I help? I have twelve minutes."

I started to give her the dismal history of our ticket sales for the last five years, when she stopped me.

"Let's do it my way. How big is your city?"

"Seven million."

"How many seats in your hall?"

"Twenty-one hundred."

"Good. How many masterworks performances?"

"Thirty-six."

At each answer, she nodded, but increasingly snapped her fingers soundlessly with impatience.

"How many pops performances?"

"Twenty-one?"

"Including Christmas?"

"No, twelve of those?"

"Percentage of seats sold per series?"

"Well, subscribers to Masterworks?"

"No, total seats sold. I can do the math. Percentages are fine."

"Masterworks 60 percent, Pops 80 percent, Christmas 95 percent."

"That's enough," she said, dug her card out of her wallet, squinted at it, and handed it to me. It was pale blue and pink and thoroughly wrinkled. "Come to my room tonight at eleven, and we'll talk some more. I think I can help."

In her haste to leave, she stumbled slightly stepping away from her chair and let out a whispered, "oof."

Her card read, above two email addresses and three phone numbers, "Tina Hawthorne: Marketing Consultant to the Symphony Orchestra World."

Really? I wondered. Behind the arrogance of it I sensed a child's empty boast.

Yes, Tina Hawthorne made an impression. A trim, willowy, busty woman dressed impeccably in designer dress and shoes, all in shades of gray, she wore her strawberry blonde hair in curls that cascaded down her shoulders, and which she often tossed aside or tucked behind translucent ears. Her minimal makeup was meant to reveal rather than hide flawless, pale skin, generous eyebrows and long lashes. Slightly too thick lips suggested a smile was perpetually lingering there and welcomed being brought to the surface. Calling her eyes "laughing" wouldn't be inaccurate, but I prefer the more playful "merry." Tina Hawthorne's eyes were merry.

In other words, a very attractive young woman in her upper twenties, perhaps five years my junior. People say that intelligence is attractive, but its appeal is cold. That didn't explain Tina's special allure, which was engaging, with the slightest tinge of invitation—and I don't mean flirtatiousness. She was friendly, even warm to the eye, but that only confused the issue further. Even with those starlit eyes and her lips all virtual smile, there was some hidden insistence that said "keep your distance." I would understand it soon enough.

I sat and pondered our conversation. The first question I asked myself was, is this someone I could work with? The answer was yes, of course, and her business acumen was evident, if a bit overwhelming. But what was I to make of the rest of it, the mixed-up appointment, her impatient grilling me for numbers, her blunder over the latte, and her abrupt departure, not to mention her invitation for later that night? Was there more to that than business?

At ten o'clock that night I realized I had no idea what room she was in. She hadn't said. I had to assume she was staying in the same gargantuan Marriott as I was. I went to the front desk and asked for her room number. The desk clerk said they had no one by that name registered.

I had a drink with a colleague and waited until just before 11 PM, then called the number she'd called me on earlier that day—no answer. I called one of the numbers on her card, then the other number. In both cases, I was told she wasn't available and that her voice mailbox was full. I texted all three numbers: "What room are you in?" No answer. I even took out my laptop and emailed her.

At midnight, I texted her one more time and waited, then I gave up and went barhopping with a couple of friends until 2 AM.

It was a three-day convention, and I was staying an extra day to visit the Met, MOMA, and the Guggenheim and to see a play that night.

I didn't try to contact Tina on the second day, thinking my texts were enough and I didn't want to bother her, since she'd clearly for-

gotten all about me. Mid-afternoon the third day, as I was walking into a plenary session about the current crisis in the orchestra field (almost every orchestra in the country was in trouble), I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and there was Tina.

"Where'd you go, Danny?"

"Daniel," I said rather stiffly.

"Well," she huffed, "if you're going to cop a 'tude because you stood me up, fine. See ya!" she said and started to turn away. She wore high heels and tottered slightly when she wasn't walking in a straight line.

"Stood *you* up?"

She turned back and came toward me. To my surprise she stepped out of her shoes and confronted me. I was slightly surprised that she didn't wear stockings, not that every business woman did. It seemed a statement of some kind, and taking off the shoes was just strange.

"Yes, two nights ago. You didn't show."

"You never told me where you were staying, Tina."

"Right here, stupid," she said, open arms indicating this hotel. She was really agitated now and threw her head back to look up at the enormous atrium of the Marriott.

"The front desk said you weren't staying here."

She thought about that for a second, then lowered both her arms and her head.

"Oh, right," she looked down, then up, right, left, anywhere but at me. "I register under a different name at these conferences or I get chased down every corridor by drooling, emaciated marketing directors begging for help."

Her humorous shot at my colleagues didn't help.

"I called and texted."

"What numbers?" she challenged me.

I took her card out of my wallet and showed it to her.

"Oops! That's an old card. Sorry. I haven't used those phones in months."

I glared at her in disbelief, quickly disarmed by her lovely blushing that reached to her ears.

“I also called the number you called me from before.”

“Why are you grilling me?” she snapped, “I always turn off my phone after dinner.”

“So all this means that I stood...”

“Look, I’ll make it up to you,” she broke in, smiling to stifle her embarrassment. “The conference is basically over at seven. I’ll buy you dinner and we can talk.”

I almost told her off for an unprofessional scatterbrain, but something told me that would be a mistake. I really did need her help.

“Where shall we meet?”

“By the front desk at nine,” she said.

All of her sweet repentance disappeared as she put on her shoes and headed for the front door. I wondered if I’d ever see her again.

But at nine, there she was, dressed in the same ensemble as two days before, only in shades of dark blue. She grabbed my arm in a stiff but comradely way, and led me to an extremely expensive French restaurant right around the corner, chatting the whole time about the horror stories she’d been hearing for the last three days.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ll even have a job in another five years,” she said as we settled into a large booth across from each other.

For the next three hours we ate too much, drank too much wine, and exhausted ourselves with the miseries of symphonies across the country, mine in particular. She’d agreed to take mine on by the end of desert; then, over two Drambuie’s, we shared our personal stories. She’d been a *New Yorker* all her life, had a masters degree in arts management and an MBA in marketing from Columbia. She’d begun her career as a marketing assistant at the Boston Symphony, then became the VP of Marketing at Baltimore, working for what she described as “beaten down” marketing VPs and “insanely arrogant” CEOs. She told the story of one, from a third orchestra that was courting her, who forced an operations manager to go on a tour to Japan even though his wife would be delivering their first child

at the same time. When he pleaded, the CEO said, “Tough shit. It’s your job. If you want to keep it, you’re going.”

“Needless to say,” said Tina, “I didn’t take the job.”

After four years, enough was enough, and she went out on her own.

“And now you’re a superstar.”

“Hardly,” she said laughing with feigned embarrassment. “I just know how to juggle the numbers and find the right messaging.”

I had noticed at our first meeting that she had a wedding band, but no engagement ring, on her constantly fidgeting fingers.

“And your husband?”

“What husband?”

“I’m sorry. I saw the ring and assumed...”

She pulled it off and put it on her right ring finger.

“One thing you’ll learn about me soon enough is, don’t assume.”

“Got it. Sorry.”

“And you?”

“I shouldn’t say.”

She could tell I had a secret. She cocked her head and looked under my eyebrows.

“Let me guess. You’re seeing someone at work and nobody knows. Nobody is *supposed* to know.”

“Yikes!” I said, leaning back. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t!” she laughed. “Wild guess.” She took a sip of her drink. “Sometimes I impress even myself, and that’s not easy!”

The falseness, the bravura of this comment was breathtaking.

“Tina,” I said, getting serious, “if we’re going to work together, you can’t tell a living soul. Geraldine and I are close, but there’s no long-term plan. You’ll meet her. She’s the director of development.”

“It’s that big of a problem?”

“It could be. Some of the board members would object and, well, you could say I was part of the reason she got divorced last year.”

“Part?”

“Just remember it’s a secret. Promise?”

“Promise,” she said, like a child told to eat her vegetables.

She insisted on paying the check, and as we were leaving the restaurant, she said, "Oh, shit! It's almost midnight!" Then she dropped her purse, which was large and expensive. A young man in a Yankees jacket and cap reached down for it at a speed that said he planned to run off with it. I put my foot on the purse, he backed off, then ran away. I picked it up and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said, looking concerned.

"It's alright," I tried to console her.

Instead, she frowned rather dramatically.

"What's the problem?"

"I don't have a room."

Had she even noticed what had just happened?

"But you live here."

"Here?"

"In New York."

"Yeah, an hour away."

I didn't ask her where.

"Can you put me up?" she asked, clutching her purse to her chest, as if defending herself from a "no."

"What?"

"Oh, don't be an adolescent. I won't molest you. That's the last thing you have to worry about."

"There's only a single bed."

"So?" she said, without a trace of a smile.

Five minutes later we were in my room, and she was in the bathroom.

Between the booze and her presence, I was totally befuddled, but not so much that I didn't have a hard-on.

She came out in blue bra and almost transparent panties and immediately slipped under the blankets and turned out the lights on her side of the bed.

"Goodnight, Danny, and thanks," she said and in seconds seemed to be snoring. Was she faking?

In the bathroom, I looked at my face, which was smiling foolishly. Though I often slept in the nude, I always brought pajamas when I stayed at hotels. When I came out, I realized that there wasn't even a couch, just two armchairs. I slid under the covers and half-expected her to awaken and make some angry objection, or, I couldn't be sure, a move? She didn't stir an inch. I gave her two-thirds of the bed and kept my back to her, hoping I wouldn't roll onto her as I sometimes did with Geraldine. I was soon asleep.

I hadn't set the alarm since this was my free day. But at six o'clock I awoke with Tina's cheek against mine, her hair, which smelled of lavender, half across my face, and her right arm over my waist and perilously close to my penis, which immediately hardened. That woke her. She jumped out of bed and ran into the bathroom.

She came out calm and fully-dressed 10 minutes later.

"I need to get going," she said, her voice like dry ice. "I have one last appointment left over from the conference. I have just a half-hour to get home to change and get back here. Thanks for the place to stay. I really appreciate it."

Then she dug into her purse and brought out a yellow business card. She double-checked it, waved it at me and put it on the table by the television.

"That's the right one," she assured herself, whispering.

Fluffing her hair in the mirror next to the television, she said, "Give me a call next week, anytime, but no later than three, that's when I knock off most days. I'm a runner. We'll figure things out. I'll need you to send me a ton of information, then we can arrange a visit. I need to hear this divine orchestra of yours. Bye!"

And she was gone as if she was walking out of my office, leaving me thinking about the hour transit to her place she'd mentioned the night before. As I dressed, I decided that she'd fibbed (again), this time to keep from having to navigate New York after midnight. Not a bad reason, I concluded.

We talked on the phone later the next week. She said, in that

chilled voice of hers, that she could visit anytime in the next three weeks.

“Great! When’s best for you?”

“What will I hear?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The orchestra. What will I hear?” she said, with that subtle impatience that I would come to recognize as her normal speaking voice. “That will tell me when to come.”

“There’s the Pops on the Green series with some big names, and a Patriotic Pops show on July 3rd.”

“I mean when will I hear some *music*, not a bunch of footballs (she meant ‘whole notes’) behind your popsters, whose names I don’t even want to hear.”

She was being arrogant and condescending, but I didn’t think she realized it.

“The patriotic concert has a couple of Tchaikovsky...”

“If I hear the *1812 Overture* even one more time, I’m going to find an Army battery of howitzers to blow me to bits!”

“Tina, excuse me,” I said and paused.

“Yes?”

“Are you always this way?”

“What way?”

I knew I was taking a big risk, but if she was going to be like this all the time, I would have to back out.

“Abrasive?”

“Abrasive? Abrasive! Honey, this is my honey voice. What, you can’t take it?”

I took a big gulp of air and said, “I can take anything, Tina. It’s just something I’ll have to get used to.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed, with considerably less of an edge in her voice. “Now, do I understand that you won’t be playing real music until your fall season begins?”

“Yes, in early September.”

“Let’s talk in mid-August.”

I thought she was going to hang up on me.

“Okay?” she asked, when I didn’t respond.

I recovered and said I would.

“I hope my calling you *Honey* wasn’t a problem.”

That broke the ice, and I laughed.

“No, sweetheart, let’s just keep it professional when you get here.”

“See you then,” she said and hung up.

Symphony orchestras plan almost a year ahead, so the delay didn’t present a problem. The crucial time for marketing decisions was late-summer to the end of the year, for concerts beginning the following fall.

As planned, she called and we set a three-day visit; she asked me to send her all of my sales figures, ticket prices and seating charts, and marketing materials, so she could prepare.

I was very ambivalent about what I said next, but I thought why not? I was a member of a working group of major orchestra marketing directors charged with coming up with a national branding strategy for symphony orchestras. Tina knew about this because she’d mentioned it in New York, rather scoffingly. I assumed her distaste was sour grapes that she hadn’t been asked to consult.

I mentioned that I would be back in New York with that meeting group the week before Labor Day and would it make any sense for us to meet?

“Sure, call me when your plans are set, and if I’m in town we’ll have dinner.”

We left it at that.

When I called to tell her when I was coming to New York, she said, “And you are?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes?” she asked, “Who is this, please?”

Totally exasperated, I reminded her who I was, from what orchestra, etc.