

5.

*Lights snap.
Natalia's office.
A day or so later.*

Natalia

You wanted to discuss something?

Tess

In confidence, if that's possible.

Natalia

In confidence, of course

Tess

I was wondering if I could inquire about the status of one of my clients
#5247

Natalia consults a chart.

Natalia

Jackson Cuthbert, tech CEO

Tess

That's the one

Natalia consults a chart. Then:

Natalia

He's been Fast Tracked

Tess

He's been Fast Tracked?

Natalia

Correct

Introspection and externalized guilt scores were particularly strong.

Tess

....

I don't buy it

Natalia

You don't buy what?

Tess

His score

Natalia

Are you recommending a revision?

Tess (!)

Oh can I do that?

Natalia

It's highly involved

And usually only conducted by very senior employees

Tess

Well

I'm willing to risk it

Natalia

What's your take

Tess

I'm

Suspicious of how much he's progressing versus how much he's just

Performing.

I found his demeanor at intake to be quite different from his demeanor more recently

Natalia

That's literally exactly what we're looking for. Growth

Tess

Is it growth?

Or is it just that he's learned how to read the room?

Natalia

It's increased emotional intelligence

Tess

Knowing the right things to say is not necessarily /

Natalia

Developing new language is a concrete gain

Tess

Are employees ever a part of the algorithm's decision making?

Natalia

What do you mean? All the data is human-generated

You can't get a number on the empathy scale by talking to a screen. That's why you're here

Tess

Right, of course. But – are there any plans to expand the algorithm?

Natalia

It took two years to build, what exactly are you suggesting we expand?

Tess

I just wish we tested for authenticity

Natalia *(a joke)*

Do you want to hook clients up to lie detectors?

Tess *(not joking)*

Maybe?

Natalia

That sounds wasteful and unproductive.

Tess

I thought we were supposed to be innovating

That's – what you told me day one

Natalia

We encourage innovation within the bounds of our methodology, not outside of them

Tess

Doesn't really sound like innovation then

Natalia

Doesn't really sound like you've ever run a major organization made up of trustees, shareholders, donors, management, and staff all with competing interests that you're asked to balance

Does it?

A breath

Tess

What is Jackson's assignment, after he leaves here?

Natalia *(?)*

His assignment

Tess

Yeah, I know that clients leave to become domestic violence hotline volunteers, or to mentor 9th graders about consent. So, what's his next step?

Natalia sighs.

Natalia

Those partnerships are extremely rare

Tess (?)

I thought they were a central component of The Gradient's process
In any interviews you / give

Natalia

We mention the few clients who've engaged with that type of work. Nowhere do we claim that that's the norm

Tess

Shouldn't it be the norm

Natalia

Do you know how hard it is to try to convince a school principal that a man who used to recklessly send dick pics should be mentoring her students?

A moment.

Then Tess tries to stick her landing.

Tess

I think Jackson is bluffing. I think a lot of these people are bluffing
And the only thing they learn here is how to rig the system. How to go through the motions and check all the boxes and then leave. And when they get out, this whole experience will feel like a minor inconvenience. It doesn't cost them anything.

Natalia

So

Tess (?)

So?

Natalia

If they get another allegation, they come back

Tess

They come *back*?

Natalia

Don't act shocked. That's always been an option

Tess (!)

And then the cycle repeats?

Natalia (*correction:*)

And then the rest of the world is down one asshole for six weeks
I will take that small victory

Tess

(Miniscule victory)

Natalia

We are a well-oiled machine at this point. So unless you want to make yourself miserable, I'd recommend being a cog, ok? It's not sexy but you'll stay sane.

And if feeling Virtuous or Important is that much of a priority for you well then you should probably just say a little mantra to yourself in the morning about how you're making a teeny tiny dent in a massively impaired culture

And maybe someday that dent will grow a little bigger and a little bigger and then crack open and reveal the divine feminine spirit or whatever the fuck and heal the wounds and reverse the paradigm and end all the harm forever and into infinity

But until then, we're just making dents.

If you squint.

Tess

I don't want to squint

Natalia

It's hard, isn't it

Tess (*thinks they're on the same page*)

God, yes

Natalia (*they're not*)

I mean when you have high expectations. Dream job, right?

I try to enter most situations with the lowest expectations possible, so I'm never disappointed

Tess

I'm not disappointed / I'm

Natalia

But you are.

What do you want?

To lock them up?

Torture them?

Abuse them back?

Natalia stares at Tess.

Waits.

Tess

I'd like to request a transfer.

Natalia

To a different department?

Tess

A client transfer

Jackson Cuthbert

Natalia

What exactly would we be filing under this transfer?

Tess

I find that the
tenor of our sessions can sometimes become
Inappropriate

Natalia

Inappropriate how

Tess

He's
not very conscientious of boundaries

Natalia

Of course he's not. That's why he's here

Tess

I realize that but /

Natalia

You set the boundaries. I told you this day one. You Create The Boundaries

Tess

He's
pried into my personal life
He's spoken to me as if I were an ex-girlfriend
He's
He makes me uncomfortable

A moment.

Natalia

Does he ever make physical contact?

Tess

No

Natalia

Crude gestures?

Tess

I don't think so, no

Natalia

Has he propositioned you?

Tess

No

Natalia

Threatened you?

Tess

No

Natalia

Do you feel like you're in danger?

Tess

That's such a charged word

Natalia

It's an important word

Tess (*suddenly remembering*)

He winked at me

Natalia

He winked at you

Tess

You asked if there were any, crude gestures
And at the end of our last session, he winked at me.

Natalia

You would call that a
Crude
Gesture

Tess

Well, in context

Natalia

Just to make sure I fully understand
Is there any part of you that also feels good?

Tess (?)

What

Natalia

When he treats you this way.

Tess

I'm confused

Natalia

You can say no. I asked you a question

Tess

So then no

Natalia

No, what?

Tess

No it doesn't make me feel good it makes me feel uncomfortable that's / why I

Natalia

All the time? Most of the time? Half the time?

And the other half, against your better judgment you, sort of like it? And then hate yourself for liking it? But still, there it is: You liking it

Natalia looks at her notes.

Natalia

Well. Think on that. But I'm sorry to inform you, I cannot honor your request

Tess

Why?

Natalia

Do you want me to transfer you every time you're paired with someone who sucks?

Do you realize where you work? You'd be out of a job

"He winked at me." I mean seriously, I have way bigger things to deal with right now:

Ass grabs. Stalkers. Employees who have been Attacked

If you'll excuse me

Darkness

A Very Soothing Voice

Listen:

We know that here at The Gradient, we spend a lot of time critiquing behavior and demanding change. But we also know that gratitude is a virtue.

And what is The Gradient grateful for?

You. That's right. You. Our clients.

Thank you for your eagerness to reach your real potential.

Thank you for your desire to transform and redeem.

And above all, thank you, from the bottom of our hearts, for not being rapists.

A round of applause, for our clients, for not being rapists.

[waits for applause. If it doesn't come:]

I said a round of applause, for our clients, for not being rapists.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

We just wanted to offer you a small token of our appreciation.