

Making the Point

by Virginia G. McMorrow

"If he doesn't have his company pay the firm by next week at the very latest, I'll kill him myself."

Heart nearly stopped, I froze at the unmistakable rage in my neighbor's voice, just over the carpeted cubicle wall. Working in such close proximity required polite behavior, as anyone who ever worked in a cubicle environment knew all too well, such as refusing to acknowledge overheard conversations. But this one sounded serious, and in need of personal attention.

My personal attention.

Shifting quietly in my chair, with the latest consulting project spread out all over my desk in a haphazard fashion, I listened shamelessly, my mouth slightly hanging open from the undisguised hostility.

"Do you have any idea what they owe us?" Dorothy Hopkins, the senior consultant next door, continued her tirade to an unknown listener. "Just take a guess." She paused, listening, then hissed so fiercely I nearly jumped from my skin. "\$50,000? For that, I'd only have his legs broken. How about \$250,000?"

I caught the pen that nearly clattered to the desk at my own shock. The projects I worked on were billed no higher than \$25,000. What on earth had Dorothy done for the delinquent client? Granted I wasn't a senior consultant, but that was one outrageously huge outstanding invoice.

"I'm not exaggerating. And do you know how that makes me look to the top brass? Especially now that it's nearly the end of the year? If they don't pay, I can kiss my bonus goodbye. And if that happens, I can kiss our plans goodbye, too."

Plans?

"He's taking shameless advantage of our friendly relationship, and I won't stand for it. Not anymore." Dorothy murmured something I couldn't make out, not unless I stood right close to the cubicle wall.

Without hesitating, and rationalizing that my action was for the good of the firm, I slipped from the chair to crouch low by the thin, carpeted wall separating our little kingdoms. So intent on listening, I didn't hear the tread of heavy heels.

"Janie? Is there a problem?" Dick Schuler, the managing partner of the firm's organizational development group, paused in the entry to my cubicle.

I jerked up, then grinned. "Just dealing with a weird stain I finally managed to scrape off the carpeting. Can't imagine what it was. Nor," I added, with a crooked smile, "do I want to." Wiping my hands with a flourish, I astonished myself by not flushing beet red as I usually would when confronted with questionable behavior. "Need something, Dick?"

And if not, can you please go away so I can listen to Dorothy's plans?

"No. Just thought you did. How's the merger reorganization for the James Partnership coming

along?"

"Almost done." I waved meaningfully at the mess on my desk. "I've just printed out the last few spreadsheets and organizational charts." Go away, Dick. "I'll have them to you after I give them one more review."

"Great, Janie, thanks." He eyed me coolly for a minute, then the cubicle wall, perhaps searching for the stain remnants, perhaps wondering about my ethics, and departed.

Just in time for me to hear the click of Dorothy's telephone.

There was a flaw in my recommendations for the James Partnership, which meant I needed to recalculate the spreadsheets. Double-checking the number of employees who weren't going to accept the cross-country transfer but opted instead for early retirement, I found the mistake. A simple transposition of numbers that made the overall cost twice as high. Making the simple adjustment to the Excel spreadsheet on my computer, I saved the file and printed a copy.

Just as my neighbor's voice intruded.

"Neil, hello. Sorry to be a pest again, but I wonder if you and I could meet to discuss that outstanding invoice."

Neil? What company was he with?

"I know it's a difficult time, but it's difficult everywhere." Dorothy's tone was reasonable, even sympathetic. "Besides, I have a surprise to show you that I know you'll appreciate. And envy. Not many people would even take a second look, but I know you will. Friday? Great. What time?" Silence ensued over the wall, then, "A late lunch would be perfect. It is a hectic time of year. How about Sam's? Considering the ambiance," she laughed heartily, "I know you'll really appreciate what I have to show you."

Sam's was a hole-in-the-wall pub, though the food was excellent. It seemed odd that Dorothy would invite a major client to such a dive. True, the guy was grossly delinquent, but that was awfully insulting. Maybe I'd better pay attention if I had any hopes of becoming a senior consultant.

"Great. See you then."

Apparently, Neil wasn't the slightest bit insulted. Bewildered, I shook my head and turned my attention back to the computer screen. Just as Dorothy was dialing another number.

"He's agreed to meet me," she whispered into the phone next door. "Boy, will I surprise Neil. When I pull out that new sharp--"

"Janie?" Dick's voice intruded into my eavesdropping. "I just got an apologetic call from the James Partnership. Seems they'll be sending some revised numbers for you to work with this afternoon. Will that be a problem?"

"Not at all. Easy enough to handle," I smiled, hiding my irritation at both the client for the additional work I'd have to do and at Dick for stepping in. Why couldn't they just send me an e-mail?

"I'll hand them over as soon as I get them."

"Thanks." Now go away.

As the managing partner departed, I heard Dorothy's voice in the silence. "I've been practicing my throw for the last two weeks. Bull's eye every time. You bet. Can't wait to see what happens. And with this new tempered steel tip, I'm guaranteed to knock him out of the running with a precision shot. He won't have a chance. Other money besides my bonus is on the line for both of us."

Practicing with a sharp object? Steel tip? Precision shot? Was she planning to kill the guy for not paying? And who was "both of us"?

Thursday afternoon, while reworking the new numbers sent in by the James Partnership, my neighbor's telephone rang.

"Dorothy Hopkins. Oh, hey--" A rolling motion indicated movement of her chair, and I wondered if it was prompted by a clandestine conversation. "There's one obvious flaw in my plan. Right. I thought about it too late. All those witnesses--"

Witnesses? Did she really mean to kill the client? I slid my chair closer to the cubicle wall, numb with amazement at her audacity.

"I'd rather no one got a close look at what I'm doing, especially in that place. Yeah, but if I make sure we're in a booth, then no one else will see what's happening." Dorothy's laugh sounded wicked, and I feared for Neil's life, whoever he was. "And when it's all over, and I come out triumphant, we can follow through on our plans. Starting with--"

"Janie?" Dick stood in the entry to my cubicle, studying my position by the wall separating me from Dorothy.

Nonchalantly, I slid my chair toward the desk.

"How are those spreadsheets coming along?" Dick's eyes darted to the wall, listening as Dorothy laughed that ominous chuckle and hung up.

"Oh, great. I can e-mail you the new set in about a half-hour. With those scattered modifications, I want to be sure I didn't miss anything."

"Ok, thanks, because the client was asking about it."

Maybe I should threaten the James Partnership so they'll back off? I wanted to ask the managing partner, wondering if that was the new firm policy that no one had yet told me about.

"No problem."

Dismissing him politely, but warmly, I returned my attention to the spreadsheets, sending a clear signal that if he didn't leave, he wouldn't get his e-mail. When Dick took the hint, without further comment, I very quickly retallied the figures, saved the new files, and shot them through the e-mail system to the managing partner.

And then turned my attention to the firm's database, hoping to find Dorothy's client before it was too late. Logging in to the system, I found the Search function and entered the name "Neil." Unfortunately, as I found out, the system discovered fifty Neils, but all were last names. I typed in Dorothy's initials to get a list of her clients. 100 organizations were listed, in alphabetical

order by company name.

"Working overtime?" Dick's face appeared back in the entryway to my cubicle. "You're usually gone by now."

"Just catching up on some work that was pushed aside by the James Partnership project. Spreadsheets look ok?"

"Perfect. I sent them off. Thanks." Dick eyed my computer screen, sufficiently distant to not realize they weren't my clients.

"Making some corrections to client accounts."

"Don't stay too late. Even the senior consultants," he smiled, inclining his head in my neighbor's direction, "don't always hang around."

"Right. Have a good evening." Grateful when the Snoopy screen saver flashed across the computer monitor, hiding the client list from view, I pretended to scribble a note on the legal pad beside the mouse, once more dismissing my boss.

"You, too, Janie. Goodnight, Dorothy." At her muffled response, Dick headed down the hallway to his own office.

And I quickly cleared the screen, ready to examine every client file for a contact by the name of Neil somebody. Relieved when Dorothy herself left fifteen minutes later, I laboriously made it through twenty client files when my screen froze.

"No way--" Pushing back my chair, I thought about rebooting the computer when I remembered the e-mail from our IT people that I'd deleted earlier in the day, telling us they were temporarily shutting down the system for an overhaul.

Which left one other option.

Standing in the entry to my cubicle, I glanced up and down the hall. No one was around, except for Joe, who always stayed late behind a closed door. Figuring that I'd hear his door open when he was leaving, I moved right ahead before my code of ethics tied my shoelaces together to stop me from snooping.

But a client's life was at stake.

Slipping from my cubicle to Dorothy's took a heart-stopping second. I started to reach for her drawer, then caught back my hand. Grabbing a tissue from the box on her desk, I used the flimsy material to pull open her desk drawer. Tugging produced no result because, of course, the drawer was locked.

I never locked my desk.

Which meant she was hiding something.

I tried the file cabinet with the same frustrating results. Glancing around Dorothy's desk, I saw no evidence of a notepad or rolodex file or anything vaguely helpful. The desk was pristine, swept clear of any documents or files.

Which meant only one other thing.

I'd have to physically stop her from attacking the poor client.

Friday morning dawned bright and sunny, and I'd had no opportunity to listen in on any other cryptic or threatening conversations. I knew she had lunch plans, late in the day, because I overheard her inform the group secretary she'd be gone from 1:45 on that afternoon.

To cover my own tracks, I told the secretary I'd be at a client that afternoon, too, going over some conflicting invoices, hoping Dick wouldn't ask too many questions if he found me missing in action.

Before Dorothy left the office, I grabbed my briefcase for appearance sake, barely avoiding Dick in the corridor, and hightailed it to the street where Sam's bar and grill was located. Standing directly across the noisy street, my nose ostensibly in a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, I kept peering over the edge of the newspaper, watching the crowd stroll by.

Five minutes later, Dorothy came striding down the sidewalk, on the side of the restaurant, swinging an oversized briefcase. How big was the weapon? Waiting until she'd entered the pub, I quickly crossed the street and tailed her inside, spotting her immediately in a booth, greeting a man with a full beard and mustache, professionally dressed in a three-piece suit, a scarlet silk tie brightening up his outfit.

The booth diagonally across from them was empty, now that the lunch crowd had dispersed. Luck was with me because Dorothy's back would be facing me. And I would be near enough to eavesdrop, while continuing to read the *Wall Street Journal* like a good little professional consultant. In the dimmer-lit back of the pub, contrary to most consultant-client hangouts, was a pool table and dartboard, where a small group of patrons were gathered to play.

Seated, finally, I listened to Dorothy and Neil exchange innocuous small talk, while I perused the menu and ordered a bowl of barley soup with a side order of house salad. That should keep me there awhile, if I ate slowly. Newspaper neatly folded on the table, I kept my head down, shamelessly eavesdropping, and ready to dash across the aisle to save Neil's life.

"I'm really sorry about the invoice," Neil apologized, his tone radiating credible sincerity. "I know it's outrageous and long overdue, but--"

"No business before lunch," Dorothy said loftily, dismissing his words. "We'll talk later. First things first. Here's what I wanted to show you."

My whole body tensed as Neil leaned over the table, curious and eager, while Dorothy rummaged in her briefcase for something.

And that something was what concerned me.

From the depths of the oversized briefcase, she pulled out a narrow, long box, her glance around the room suspiciously furtive. That sweeping gaze nearly caught me, but I was on to her, knew she didn't want anyone else in the restaurant to see what she was pulling from the bag. And so I'd purposely lifted the paper until she turned her attention back to Neil.

Opening the box, she lifted a long, slender dart with, I assumed, a tempered steel tip. Neil gasped in obvious admiration, which I didn't understand. He reached out to touch the dart, its wickedly sharp point dangerously close to his flesh.

And then I realized what I'd missed. I saw how Dorothy would murder him, in spite of witnesses.

She hadn't planned to stab Neil, but poison him.

As his finger bridged the gap, I leaped from my booth, and shoved him back. "Don't touch it. It's poisoned."

Stunned, Neil stared at me as though I were insane. Dorothy, on the other hand, sat back calmly, appraising my red-faced cheeks. Her expression, rather than guilty, was perplexed, bemused, and a little annoyed.

"Neil Bartermen, this is my colleague and cubicle neighbor, Jane Foster."

"Pleased," Neil cautiously shook my hand. "I think."

Dorothy waved the offending weapon in the air. "Care to join us and explain what that little outburst was all about before Sam calls the cops?"

Driven by the urge to save the client's life, I sat beside Neil, suddenly aware of the curious glances of the other customers. "I heard you say you were going to kill Neil for not paying the \$250,000 his company owes us."

"You heard me say what?" Dorothy blinked, her expression confounded, as she and Neil exchanged glances. "You heard me--" And then, to my utter amazement, she started to laugh and didn't stop until tears rolled down her cheeks. "And, oh, Jane, this is too priceless."

Watching us both, Neil leaned his chin on one arm and waited patiently, as Dorothy's laughter slowly faded.

"I heard you on the phone, and I wanted to warn Neil, but I couldn't find out who he was, and--" My babbling stopped as Dorothy started laughing again. "I don't see what's so funny."

Waving a hand at Neil, she said, "Tell this moron why I have this dart."

Figuring he wouldn't get more than that until Dorothy stopped laughing, Neil explained, "We're in a dart league, competing in a tournament tomorrow night. That dart--" his eyes glowed with admiration again, and I thought they were both crazy, "is a top of the line model that Dorothy's going to try and use to knock me out of first place and win the prize money for herself."

"But--"

Dorothy indicated the offending weapon as she put it back in the box. "Didn't you ever hear people say, 'I'm going to kill him' and not mean it?"

"Sure, but--"

"Well, I was complaining to my boyfriend how Neil's company still hadn't paid the invoice. I was mad. And Neil knew it. Still knows it, in fact. But that doesn't mean-- Oh, please tell me you don't really think I was coming here to kill my client." Dorothy started to laugh again, and all I could do was shake my head.

"Sorry," I murmured, completely and utterly embarrassed. I made my way back to my own booth, left some bills for the waiter, grabbed my briefcase and the newspaper, and fled into the sunny afternoon. Too ashamed and humiliated to return to the office, I headed for home and the weekend ahead.

I hadn't slept all weekend, worrying about Dorothy lodging a complaint to Dick, the managing partner. Frankly, I didn't know what to say to her. The words I'd overheard and the tone she used were too authentic.

With more than a little trepidation, I got off the elevator and went through the main doors to our headquarter office and found a crowd of people standing around Dorothy's cubicle. Great, she probably made a general announcement and now had everyone laughing at me behind my back. Slinking along the fringe of the group, I didn't hear anyone laughing, didn't, in fact, see Dorothy.

Dick was standing in the middle of the group, his expression somber when he saw me arrive. Had Dorothy filed a lawsuit against me?

"Janie? Did you hear the news?"

Setting my briefcase on the desk, I braced for the worst. "What news?"

"Dorothy had a heart attack over the weekend."

"She-- But--"

"Yeah," he agreed, waving over a few other of my colleagues. "No one knew she had such a shaky condition. Apparently, she was competing in a dart-throwing contest down at Sam's pub this weekend."

Spellbound, I listened to his words, having difficulty taking it all in before my morning dose of caffeine.

"What happened?"

"It seems that she bought this brand new, snazzy dart and was showing it to Neil Bartermen, one of our clients, in fact, who also competes. When he handed it back to her, someone in the crowd behind them, well, you know, a pub on a Saturday night-- By accident, it seems, someone pushed into Neil, who almost dropped the dart, and when he caught it, was jostled again into Dorothy."

"And?" Someone in the crowd prompted when Dick paused and shook his head, his expression a blend of confusion and bewilderment.

"It seems the dart punctured Dorothy's hand. And all the police could assume was that the steel tip was so sharp, she might have been frightened. Imagine someone coming at you with a sharp object. They figure she had a coronary and couldn't take the scare. A real shame. Almost unbelievable."

Stunned, I stepped back into my cubicle, thinking hard as the crowd dispersed. Automatically, I booted up my computer and waited until the e-mail application opened. Lost in thought, I quickly scanned the messages and found one that nearly made me fall out of my chair.

It was from Neil Bartermen: "Looks like you were right all along. How would you like a new client?"