

## FIRST PERSON

## THE COLOR TEAL

A few months ago, I maneuvered my way to the bar at Partners to order another gin and tonic. To my immediate left sat Randy, a fine gentleman with whom I had once shared an ignominious nonboss. I had not seen Randy in three years and wasn't sure how to break the silence at this particular moment. Suddenly, he turned and made eye contact with me, forcing a round of handshakes and pleasantries and lost memories.

"You know what I remember most of all about you?" he asked. "It was the day you painted your office. I'll never forget that."

The year was 1991. An overcast Friday. I had been assigned Cubicle 87632-D in a boxy downtown office building owned by a large monopolistic concern in the city.

Preparing to occupy my new cell, I performed a close inspection of the quarters. Just as I thought: nail holes in the metal-panel walls, discoloration of the institutionally issued eggshell paint and a general gray pall cast over the room from a bank of military-issue fluorescent light panels. Industrial dark carpet of no particular color. Four narrow, shuttered, floor-to-ceiling windows. A deck of mismatched fibrous ceiling

panels, generally in the right tracks. Two chairs. One desk. A phone. And, yes, the most cherished perq in the building: a door. In fact, a door which actually could close out the high-traffic hallway intersecting three departments assigned to meeting frantic deadlines.

Inspection completed, I sauntered down to the cafeteria to find the nonboss at his regular table, #47936-B. In recent years, the smoking tribe had been expelled from all nine floors of the firm. They were now corralled on to a 35-square-foot highly ventilated reservation. If we ever wanted to perform certain occasional unpleasantries, such as to confab with the nonboss or to seek permission to paint one's office, we would have to venture on to their turf.

"I was thinking of freshening up the office a bit," I said most casually. "But seeing as how we're out of Forms 62007-P to req the paint department, I thought I might save the ol' firm a little money and paint the place myself this weekend."

He was busy lining up the butts into an orderly row in his ashtray.

"Sure," he said. And that was it. No mention of color. No glancing above the reading glasses. Permission granted.

Carte blanche. Or, rather, carte teal.

Saturday morning, I applied three coats of an exquisite deep teal latex paint. Saturday afternoon, I turned off the fluorescent panels and installed a high-tech shaded incandescent light, placed a fine ceramic lamp on the desk, brought in the antique Shaker conference table with matching benches and chairs, other rustic end tables and credenzas, hung a few framed prints and posters and scattered a few porcelains and a nice oval tweed rug.

On Monday morning, I waited until everyone else had reported to their cubes. Then I opened my door, turned on the low lights, sat at my desk and picked up the phone. It was perhaps four, maybe five seconds before Randy strolled by my door, said the usual, "Good Morning," and walked four more feet before stopping - dead in his tracks. He was soon joined by a greeting line of dozens of others, who brought friends and associates from other floors - some of whom had not been to our floor in years - to see "the office."

Soon, folks asked if they could eat lunch at my table. Some hosted informal department meetings there. One manager stopped by to tell me I had embold-

ened her to paint her bedroom a deep red. She reported never being happier. Another spent the weekend painting all her bathrooms deep dark colors - to the great consternation of her husband. Even the ninth-floor pinstripes - yea, they of the oriental-rug-and-teak-walled-office-and-basement-parking-spot set - were heard speaking admiringly about the new look.

Then, it happened. Someone from Accounting called the president to ask if she could paint her walls fuschia. Another manager called to inquire about some sort of J.Crew-type color called "misty spirit."

That was it. Orders were summarily drawn up on the ninth floor and dispatched through the ranks of managers: *Return Cubicle 87632-D to its original eggshell patina.*

It wasn't long before I was summoned to the smoking corral and table #47936-B. "That's it," the nonboss said. "I can't trust you anymore. You're a troublemaker, no doubt." With that he cast me out - out of the box and into the street. To find another job. Another firm. Another world. And yes, another office now painted teal. ☘