

“Budding Confidence”
by: Sarah Clement-West

The tea kettle on the stove whistled, startling Jerika. The noise made her fling her toast across the kitchen counter. Today she was unusually on edge because she would interview for an internal position at The Back Burner for the fifth time. Four times before she had sat in front of her supervisor and made her case for a promotion. Four times she was given some lame excuse about male junior employees who were “more qualified.” She wanted that Vice President title badly. Maybe once she got it she would get a little more respect. The consulting firm she worked for advised entrepreneurs on how to grow their business. She and her team had helped many of them move back burner dreams to fruition. She loved helping others achieve their dream, develop their mission statement and perfect their business plan, but her own wasn't realized.

Jerika retrieved her toast, taking a bite, then poured the boiling water into her teacup. As her tea cooled, she finished her morning routine, plaiting two thick cornrows on either side of her head. She turned her head from side to side in the bathroom mirror, she liked the way her hair looked in tight braids. She felt confident with this style, often wearing it when winning over new clients. She decided to embrace that same mindset for the VP role.

With an eye for detail, she had started in the graphic design department, and in the five years she had worked here, had excelled but couldn't get beyond Director of Client Services. Today, that would change.

The village of tiny houses where she lived was built for employees of The Back Burner. Residents could walk or bike to work. Jerika put her black pumps in a shoebag and slipped on sensible sneakers.

Stepping outside, she was greeted by the flower bed near her front door. Once drab and lifeless, it was now sprouting amaryllis and agapanthus. After receiving her first rejection for a promotion, she tried growing something that would make her happy when she looked at it. Something like a welcoming patch of sunshine her grandmother once had. She had purchased the brightest and healthiest plants—pansies, petunias, and begonias—with the expectation they would be there next spring. By fall every plant had faded to dead brown stalks.

Jerika read up on the plants she had purchased and realized they were annuals which live for one growing season before dying. If she wanted her plants to last, she needed to buy perennials which regrow every spring. Each year she increased her knowledge and found more to know and love about plants. Four years in, she was designing flower beds in her doodle book and tinkering with flower-themed business names to relax.

As she started off to work, the balmy Louisiana weather calmed her. Her mood improved even more at the sight of newly bloomed flowers lining the building's walkway. She cupped a flower, taking a moment to admire the beautiful landscaping. She was determined to make her space as inviting and lovely as this one.

Jerika's disappointment over the failed flower-bed was just as great as being passed over for the promotion, but here with the flowers she felt more in control. She walked past the landscapers who were tidying up the flower beds to get to the front door. When she stepped inside The Back Burner's lobby, which doubled as an atrium, she spotted Paola, the owner of Green Thumb Landscaping. Paola exuded the warmth and confidence of one who is familiar and comfortable with her craft. The older woman, after pinning back long curly strands of hair, examined, deadheaded, and watered plants. Jerika only had a few minutes, but part of her morning routine included asking Paola a few questions. She knew more about plants than Jerika thought possible, making every aspect seem intricate yet so rewarding.

Jerika changed into her pumps, and waved Paola down. "What type of bulbs would you plant right now for continuous blooming in the spring?"

Paola thought for a moment. "I would plant coneflowers, daylilies, dianthus... you tell me why though"

Jerika thought about what the three had in common. "They're winter hardy perennials, meaning they will bounce back even after a freeze."

"That's right," laughed Paola, "even better than ever. You have gotten much better at plant knowledge over the years."

Jerika thought about the many interviews and rejections she had endured. If today's interview didn't go her way, would she be able to bounce back? As Jerika entered the interview room Jason, her immediate supervisor, smiled at her. The four other men barely looked up so she sat at the long conference table.

While introducing her, Jason threw out the words hardworking and knowledgeable several times. The panel asked questions, she answered, trying to be as engaging as possible. During the interview, heads nodded and whispers were exchanged. Then it was over.

"Thank you Jerika," said Jason, "we have several more candidates to interview. We'll get back to everyone in a couple of days."

"Thank you," said Jerika with a pasted smile. She gathered her things and walked out.

Two days later Jason stopped by her office.

"Jerika, everyone agreed that it was an excellent interview. We're asking you, Braxton and Cedric to do a second interview. The three of you..."

Jerika blanked at the mention of Braxton and Cedric, Braxton and Cedric...really? Braxton couldn't find his butt with both hands and a flashlight and Cedric just took up all the oxygen in the room. These were the guys she oversaw and fixed all their mistakes. She had to work so much harder just to be in the room. Surely Jason knew how incompetent these two were. Jerika

was so angry she could scream, instead she walked outside. The smell of freshly cut grass calmed her. She spotted Paola and walked up to her.

“Hola, Jerika.” said Paola

“Hola, Paola, Puedo ayudarle;”

“Sí,” said Paola. “Muy bien, you are getting really good at the language also.” Without saying much else Jerika joined her as she tidied up plants, removing weeds and pulling off spent flowers and yellowed leaves. She and Paola worked side by side while the crew trimmed hedges swiftly and efficiently up and down the lawn. Every now and then Paola quizzed Jerika on the names of the plants.

When they were done, Paola turned to Jerika.

“Do you know why we pull weeds?” Before Jerika could say yes, Paola answered. “Weeds compete with flowers and overtake them, taking up the scarce resources of water, minerals and sunlight. A flower will always have difficulty growing among weeds.”

Later, as Jerika went over her day she wondered why she hadn't seriously thought about opening her own landscaping company before. The flowers were the one part of her day that gave her joy.

The next day, Jerika was deep in thought in her office when Jason buzzed her over the phone intercom.

“Jerika, please come to my office.”

Jerika's heart skipped a beat. “Be right there.” She stopped by the ladies room to check her face.

“Come in,” said Jason, “have a seat.” She did, but on the edge.

“We would like to offer you the position of Vice President at The Back Burner.”

“Thank you,” she said. “What about the second interview?” A question tugged at the back of her mind. “How did Braxton and Cedric take the news?”

“I wouldn't worry about them. Neither of them work for The Back Burner anymore.”

“Wh... What?”

“The panel offered the role to Braxton first, then Cedric, and funny enough, both of them used their offer to negotiate VP roles at our competition, Tight Consulting, I didn't see it coming. But, forget them, I told the panel you would be a great asset and a better fit for this position than Braxton or Cedric.”

‘I could have told you that,’ thought Jerika. “So, I'm your third choice?” She said out loud.

“You already know most of the folks,” Jason said. “You know your way around and we think you will check several boxes --” Jerika held her hand up to stop Jason.

“Look, Jason, several years ago I would have jumped at the chance to be VP. Thank you for the offer but I'm going to have to decline the position.” Jerika could see the blood drain from Jason's face. “I'm opening my own business.” Jerika reached into her portfolio and pulled out a large Ziploc bag. Inside, a resignation letter she had penned after being passed over the third time. She wanted to make sure it was in good condition when she had the courage to hand it over. Was she really going to uproot herself?

“You're leaving?” Jason choked out.

“Yes... I am .”

Jerika knew she had the resolve to make it work. As she left work that day the seed of self respect took root. She knew with hard work and determination that seed would grow.