"Will You Come In, Please?"

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Abstract

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"Civilian"—and glad of it. Most of these Waves were a lousy bunch. Any fool knew what they were after. Yes, that was it, and little else. But the kind of men they got they could keep as far as she was concerned.

"Personnel." Well, that's debatable. The word looks like it refers to persons. Name two in this outfit who aren't brown-faced zombis—the living dead. And if you could name what any of them were here for, you could have a box of yellow-green cigars, and two tickets to next week's production.

What are we here for, anyway? Give six reasons, and you won't come any closer than to a 26-hour day. It was a problem, all right. She wished she could make them all tell her what they were here for on penalty of signing out. "What are you here for, Commander—of course you aren't here yet, but in about ten more minutes. . . . You'll come in and stalk the length of office, and with a final puff on that cigar, retire into your holy-of-holies, and that will be all from you until quarter to twelve." "Yes, and what about you, Lieutenant—we're expecting you any day now." "And you—what are you here for—any of you nimble-fingered, dim-witted gals—two of you past 35, still calling yourselves 'gals'."

For that matter, what am I doing here? With a question like that staring you in the face, how did you ever dare to look in the mirror this morning? Now, Virginia Brooks, you'll have to go clear through the day knowing what you look like—yes, blue teeth, purple eyes, pink hair—all of it. Go ahead, think about it a while, and try to explain yourself.

Sorry, there really isn't time for that now. Here I am: the whys and wherefores could go on all day, and people are beginning to come.

Ah, yes, here he is. I might say more than the usual bright
“Good morning, Commander” but if I went on for fifteen minutes he still wouldn’t come out from behind that cigar. I might say “Good morning, Commander. Why don’t you open your little blue eyes and take a look when you walk through the office this morning? Don’t you ever see their unconscious change in posture, the change in rhythm of typewriter keys, the positively flowing efficiency poured on just for you at eight-fifteen every morning? Don’t you ever hear the smirk in their minds saying “There you go, Snuffy, pardon me, Commander Snuffy, there you go—no use trying to hide behind that cigar, though it’s almost big enough? No, Commander, I guess you don’t hear or see. You’re wound in the sad knowledge that you hate the woodiness of your figure-head job. I really don’t blame you for keeping that cigar smoke wrapped protectively around you as you hibernate for the morning.” He’s gone now, gone through that significant door, and as for the significance of that door, we’ll just have to go into that later.

Virginia let a professionally sweet smile slide onto her face, giving every indication of staying there until the face cracked and the teeth fell into the cracks. She turned the smile on the woman sitting at the far end of the bench opposite her. “May I help you, please.” The old line didn’t sound too bad this morning. Who knows, someday she might really be able to help someone.

The young woman smiled nervously and handed Virginia a completed application, written in painstaking Palmer script. The catch on the strap of her inexpensive watch came loose, and Virginia noticed the small wrist, thin fingers. “This looks good. Check it over quickly. Education complete—fine. Experience listed in order—very nice. In fact, unusual.” She turned to the last page and sighed inwardly. The woman was unsuccessfully at ease.

“You give your husband’s employer as the United States Navy. Will you please give also his name, rating, and address? . . . . Then if you’ll be seated for just a moment, please.”

The nice young woman wrote quickly, surely—“Outgoing Unit”, walked back to the bench and sat down very carefully. “Trying,” Virginia thought, “trying hard.”

Virginia got ready to smile on the next applicant, but the smooth one was already on her way to the desk. “I’d like to see the Lieutenant, please.”
The smile comes even harder when you don't want to use it, doesn't it, old gal, thought Virginia. "Will you fill out this application, please? Lieutenant Turner isn't in yet."

The smoothie smiled sweetly back. "My father said it wouldn't be necessary. He said everything was arranged and all I had to do was see Lieutenant Turner. I don't have much time, you know, only about eight or ten weeks before I have to go back to Stevens."

"If you'll just be seated please, until Lieutenant Turner comes—it'll just be a few minutes, I'm sure." Well, you old smoothie, you didn't have to say that about Stevens. Stevens was oozing out your ears and off the curly ends of your beautiful long blond hair. And I might add that you've cooked your goose for sure with me now. The nerve of you—you haven't got much time. I'm in the know here, and it just happens that there's only one temporary job open for the summer. Oh, you're safe enough. You'll get it; you don't have to worry. But as far as time is concerned, take a long look at that girl sitting next to you. There, but for the grace of God—you know what I mean. How would you like to be sitting there in a slightly wrinkled but very practical brown-and-white sheer thinking that in eight or ten weeks your husband will be an eternity away from you and trying, trying, TRYING to think of some way that you can be with him for just those eight or ten weeks? Just sit tight, smoothie, Lieutenant Turner will be in pretty soon, and he's going to just love talking to you.

Any minute now—of course, he tries not to be too prompt in his lateness—maybe he won't get here at eight forty-five—maybe he'll wait until nine o'clock. He should do quite an effective entrance this morning—wait and see. The typewriters behind me have slowed up quite a bit since the Commander went through—they'll stop entirely when the Big Moment arrives. One minute, please—the fanfare, please—all right, Mister Turner.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Turner."

Wait—take it easy, smoothie. Virginia shook her head "No" at the girl from Stevens. Give him time to gather up the applause from the rest of the office. Let "the gals" have their thrill—let them bask in the brilliance of his smile—you'll have him all to yourself soon, and they'll hate you then because you might make an impression on him, young as you are, and one never knows what an eligible lieutenant might do, does one?
Smiling slightly to herself at the thought of Mister Turner, and bowing to him mentally, Virginia went into the office with an application in Palmer script and the name of a girl from Stevens. The Lieutenant looked at them, and sighed loudly. "Will you bring in Miss Blythe, please, Virginia?"

"Yes, sir," and as Miss Blythe glided through the door, the woman in the brown-and-white print moved uncomfortably and changed slightly her position on the wooden bench.

Well, thought Virginia, what in heaven's name can I do about it? He'll see you eventually, but it won't do any good then. Old "Smoothie" Blythe has already gone through that door, lady, and fate is unkind. Yes, that door—fate. Some of us know somebody, and if we know somebody we get through that door. Now and then fate overrules, and lets through one who doesn't know anybody, maybe even a sailor's wife, but not often. I could let you through, I guess, but fate would bounce you out again. You're sunk before you're launched.

And so's this girl talking to me now—the one who just came in. Her voice is beautiful; her application is precise; her clothes nicely correct. And her skin is ... black. "May I help you ... Will you be seated for a few minutes, please?"

It's happened before, and it will happen again. She'll wait for hours. He'll see her just before closing time, and in the tone of his voice, "It's too late to refer you anywhere today, can you come back tomorrow?" she should know there will be, can be, no tomorrow. But for now she'll just have to sit there as the hours pass and wait to hear me say ... .

"Will you come in, please?"