

Dear Prudence

a novel

by Mark Pritchard

Chapter 1: Like Real Americans

The lesson of the day was: “Now may I ask for your telephone number, beginning with the area code?” Chandrika, one of the instructors, was getting them to repeat the first part over and over, concentrating on the diphthong in “now.”

“Americans say ‘now’ like a cat,” she said. “Na-ow.”

The students all bleated, “Na-ow.”

Stella looked down at the class roll, filled with the names of Hollywood stars. “Julia Roberts,” she called.

A fleshy Indian lady wearing black-framed glasses and an orange and green sari repeated “Na-ow.”

“Britney Spears,” Stella called.

A young woman dressed in a light blue t-shirt, but with a soft woolen shawl thrown around her for the sake of modesty, repeated "now" in an even more cat-like fashion that made the class laugh.

"Let's not overdo the cat thing," Stella said. "Tom Cruise." The accent of Tom Cruise -- whose real name was Praveen something -- was pretty terrible.

"No - woo," he said.

"That's not it at all," Chandrika broke in. "You sound like my uncle from Delhi." The class worked for twenty minutes on un-learning their native pronunciation of "now" and learning a nasal American pronunciation. "Na-ow" sounded weird on its own, but maybe Chandrika was building to something. Stella spaced out, watching their mouths open and close like tropical fish, until Chandrika turned to her. "Any suggestions, Stella?"

Stella roused herself. "What we would probably do is pause slightly after the 'now.' 'Now... may I ask for your telephone number?'"

"Thank you, Stella," Chandrika said. "Let us have a small pause then: 'Na-ow. May I ask for your telephone number.'"

When they were learning to pronounce "May I have your name, please?" Chandrika had them saying something like "view" in the middle of the sentence. "Ha view name." But by the end of the class they were all able to chirp the question like real Americans.

Stella could bear this for a 75-minute-long class. But after three classes a day, listening to the students say the same thing over and over with her simply calling out the names of movie stars and making on occasional comment, Stella felt ready to go insane. On the fourth day of the class, she surprised Chandrika by taking over at the outset. Already used to Chandrika, the students

reacted nervously, and their dubious expressions made Stella anxious to exert control. As Chandrika retreated uncertainly to the chair Stella usually occupied, Stella ran through the exercise on the word "beginning" like a drill sergeant. "May I have your name, b'gunning with the lass name," Stella drawled in her best imitation of an Iowa soda jerk. "B'gunning, b'gunning! Remember, no 'bee,' and a soft 'n.'"

"You were zealous today, Stella, that was good," Chandrika said to Stella when they returned to their cube. "You must be intolerant, like a retired old auntie in Phoenix who can't understand anything foreign."

"I hate that," said Stella.

"Just remember: the students are glad to give up their accents. It means advancement."

The problem, of course, was that Stella didn't care. It was true what Chandrika said, that San Franciscans were more tolerant of difference. In that case, they should have gotten somebody from Nebraska to come out to Bangalore and teach accent improvement.

Chapter 2: Stella = Godzilla

Stella Claire Smith, known to her father as Starry Shine, took the Muni every morning from her apartment in the Western Addition to her job downtown at a bank.

When she told people she worked at a bank, she knew they imagined her standing behind a counter telling people she was putting a hold on their deposit. In fact, the closest she ever got to any actual banking was the ATM in the lobby of the office building where she worked in the customer service department, running statistics.

The office building was two and a half blocks south of Market, in an area that was mostly new skyscrapers and parking lots. The building was approached through a shady little courtyard, planted with ferns and eleven redwood trees. The trees were planted when the building was put up in the late 1980s, and now they were several stories tall and formed a shady barrier between the building and the street.

Inside the lobby, next to the ATM, was a coffee cart with seven people in line. Stella joined the line. Every month when she did her bills she told herself she was spending too much on café latte, but most mornings she stopped at the coffee cart. While she waited, twenty or thirty people came into the lobby and walked directly to the elevators -- people with more self-discipline, or people who didn't like coffee as much. She knew it couldn't be the fact that they could not afford to buy double latte every day, because she recognized many of them from work, and she knew they'd been there longer and made more money than she did. There went Joyce Babbage, a program manager in Customer-Facing OnLine Services, followed by her minion Kathi, who was carrying a stack of boxes from the Kinko's around the corner.

Stella smirked. They weren't supposed to use Kinko's, they were supposed to send work in-house to Duplicating. But Joyce thought she was above the rules, so brazen about it that she got Kinko's boxes carried right through the lobby.

Stella advanced in the line and was now third. There went Chet Pratt, a product manager in a department somewhat related to hers. Chet liked to throw his weight around and make other departments do his group's work and call it Mission Sharing. Then when somebody asked him to do something, he was always Overcommitted.

There was a time when it looked like their departments might be re-orged, with Chet Pratt becoming her boss. That was an anxious time; her consumption of double lattes and 12-grain muffins had risen forty percent. The re-org happened but her department was spared, not because of anything she and her co-workers did or because of any mistake Chet had made. The higher-ups needed someplace to put a past-it manager in late middle age who had lost a power struggle but was too stubborn to quit. She thought of this man, Gregor -- now her boss's boss, and Chet's too -- as an old duffer. He was the head of OnLine Marketing Services but had an aversion to computers and never used the internet; his admin did all his email and appointments and printed them out for him, and then he wrote notes in a desk diary. He older than her father and should, Stella thought, be retired and sailing a boat or something. This was America; if you couldn't become a celebrity, which was most people's secret ambition, the only explanation was that you were putting up with being an adult until you could retire and do what you'd always wanted to do. Only a few people got a second act, including her father, who retired from being a foreign correspondent to become a journalism professor. But in fact he had already achieved the American dream of becoming a celebrity, because his book about his fearless adventures in

Central America and other hot spots had made him a minor hero, at least among the kind of people who read *The Nation*.

Finally she reached the front of the line and gave her order to a coffee-colored guy named Devon, who worked the register and got her muffin and relayed her coffee order to Bruce, who worked the espresso machine. They were both gay, a crack team. She felt the eyes of everyone behind her in line as she juggled the money, her purse, the coffee and the little bag with the muffin. But when she turned around to give an apologetic, sheepish smile, she saw there was no one in line behind her at all.

A few minutes later she was at her desk on the tenth floor. At some point during an energy crisis a few years ago, all the lighting had been dimmed; the bank let people buy little desk lamps if they wanted. Since the building had been closed in by taller ones put up during the dot com boom, little direct light came in through the windows, and there were offices on all the exterior walls anyway, so that little natural light reached the cubicles. The tenth floor was constantly in twilight, lit as much by computer monitors and desk lamps as by the overhead lights. Stella's cube was on a particularly dark aisle, because the people on either side of her had been laid off the year before, and no light emanated from those cubes.

She got to work on time but usually spent the first half hour or so on personal email, looking at websites, and writing her blog. The bank had a policy against all this, and in fact most people in the bank wouldn't have even been able to see external websites because Global Information Technology filtered everything out. But because she worked in OnLine Services and they had to be in the swing of all things internet, she and her co-workers were allowed to view just about anything they wanted, unless it had words like "blow jobs" -- then it got filtered out. This was a problem because Stella liked to write satirically about blow jobs in her blog. She found that if

she typed "b10w" instead of "blow" it got through. She thought of this as ten blow jobs, which seemed much dirtier than just one or two, so it was satisfactory.

In fact, she had little to do with blow jobs, doing crack, getting blind drunk, losing all her money on online poker, or any of the other stuff she wrote about in her blog, which was all just a big joke. It was about one of her Starry Shine personas, of which she had many.

Blog-StarryShine was a sort of dissolute, down-market heiress with a lot of different addiction problems but a stupidly positive approach to life -- kind of like Paris Hilton, only literate.

Blog-StarryShine did have a lot to do with blow jobs, substance abuse, and all the other stuff that Paris Hilton was supposed to do, only she had a blog.

Right now Stella was trying to decide if blog-StarryShine was a Democrat, a Republican, or what. She knew blog-StarryShine was too cynical to be a Democrat, but not evil enough to be a Republican, despite her seemingly bottomless personal fortune; she was too dumb to be a Libertarian, and since a Green was even more sincere than a Democrat, she couldn't go there. But Stella wanted StarryShine to have political opinions. No, that wasn't right. She wanted StarryShine to think she had political opinions. Then these could be as brain-dead and derivative as most of the other stuff StarryShine had to say. She quickly composed a few paragraphs on gay marriage, which StarryShine endorsed in a loopy way, but only because it meant she could talk about "b10w jobs" as much as she wanted.

Stella was now ready to face the day. She checked her calendar on Outlook, but it almost never varied; she had three regular meetings a week, two project meetings and a One On One with her boss Genady. She checked her email, but almost no one sent her anything directly; most of it was stuff that went out to the whole department (Agenda for Tuesday Meeting), to the whole building (More Stairway Smoking Incidents), to all company employees in San Francisco

(Sign Up Now For Heart-To-Heart Saturday), or to some other slice of the company's employees.

Trivial as these messages were, they had helped her comprehend a part of her job when she came to the company, because they helped her realize that all the employees of the company could be grouped into sets -- just the managers, say, or just the managers in San Francisco, or all the employees in San Francisco whether they were managers or not. The same could be done with the customers, namely the ones who used OnLine Banking Services. Her job, or part of her job, was to turn customer service statistics into charts with colored bars and lines that went up and down. To do this she used several software programs, the most challenging of which was something called Prognos. It allowed her to do something to data that her boss called "slice and dice," and to do this, Prognos put all the data into what it called a cube.

Think of all the employees in the company in one enormous building. Imagine that every person has an office or cubicle that is directly in line with all the others, on a grid that extends both horizontally and vertically, and that there is no other space such as that taken up by conference rooms, rest rooms or elevators. It's just a cube crammed full of people, one to a space, in every direction. And finally, suppose that everyone with a window office along the north side of the building worked in her division, OnLine Marketing Services.

Now imagine that Godzilla, on a contract from Human Resources, comes along with a giant knife and makes a vertical slice along the edge of the building as easily as slicing through a block of cream cheese, removing a part of the building to the depth of exactly one vertical layer of offices. Godzilla would then have a sort of honeycomb of screaming bank employees, a grid of offices so many long and so many wide, but only one deep. This was a slice. Because only managers got window offices, Godzilla has just taken a sample of the company's managers -- as

it happens, all the OnLine Marketing Services managers, including Joyce Babbage and Chet Pratt on the 10th floor. If Godzilla had taken out the south side, he might have gotten all the Retail Banking managers.

In any case, Godzilla doesn't eat them, or scorch them with his fiery breath, or even toss them into the bay. He just interrogates them as to their salaries, let's say -- though this does put a particular scare into Joyce and Chet, because they are terrified anyone else will find out how much the company is paying them to fuck around. And then he puts them all back, but only on condition that the people with corner offices hang banners outside their windows giving a total of all the managers' salaries on their floor. Now we know the total of the salaries of all the people with window offices on the 1st floor, the 2nd floor, and all the way up. And on the roof there is another line of banners, showing the total of everyone in a vertical column, though these totals are not very meaningful since everyone works in a different department. What is meaningful to Godzilla, the HR consultant, is the outlandish total of managers' salaries on the 10th floor, including those of Chet and Joyce but also several others who work for Gregor, who has a corner office. Gregor looks unhappy hanging the banner outside his window, but he always looks unhappy.

Stella clicked on a browser window and scanned a few of the blogs she followed. Browsing blogs was like overhearing the chatter at the popular girls' table in a high school cafeteria -- they knew about interesting new gizmos and music, the latest gossip, who to adore and who to mock. In this fascination with ephemera, bloggers were like high school girls; but in real life, they were computer geeks, bicycle activists, porn reviewers (how in the world did you get *that* job?), cool mothers of toddlers, and performance artists. Not one cool blogger worked in a cube at a bank, as far as she could tell. And her StarryShine blog didn't count, because it wasn't about working in a

cube, it was about being fabulous. The notion that some of the more glamorous-appearing bloggers might not be quite as glamorous in reality had crossed her mind, but since she hoped there was someone out there who believed in the reality of StarryShine, Stella was willing to believe in the reality of bloggers named Xenii, Badger and Violet Blue.

After reading blogs for a while, Stella turned back to Prognos. Now, because Godzilla is so powerful, he takes a different slice of the building -- not a slice on the edge, but the entire 10th floor. Again, he has a slice of the building, this time very deep and wide, but only one floor tall. This happens to be the entire Internal Products Department of Marketing Services. The unlucky managers on the north side of the tenth floor are again taken in this slice, including Gregor and Joyce and Chet, but so is everyone else, including Stella and Kathi and everyone in their department. Godzilla asks them how much the company spent on their health plans last year, then lifts up the top of the building again and puts the 10th floor back. Now every single person with a window office on the 10th floor has to hang a banner outside giving the totals of people in their rows. Unhappy Gregor, in his corner office, now has three banners -- the first one with the salary figures, and two more for the health plan totals, one totaling those on the north side, another for the people on the front of the building. But there are no new banners on the roof, because Godzilla took a horizontal slice, not a vertical one.

Godzilla is powerful enough to take these slices out of the building on any of two dimensions -- the entire north side, or the 10th floor, or along the east-facing front of the building or any of the layers behind it. Godzilla can make the employees hang banners outside their windows, or raise them on the roof, giving totals, and in fact the totals are the whole point. But not even Godzilla can total three dimensions at once.

Stella is Godzilla, and Prognos is her knife, but not about HR. Much as she would like to, she doesn't get to ask subsets of the company's employees how much money they make or find out whether insurance paid for Joyce's bad facelift. Instead, Stella has a cube containing all the bank's customers who use OnLine Banking. This lacks human interest, as her reports have titles like Increase in Balance Requests by Week/Month, or Average Time Spent On Line; in fact, all these reports are automated now, and she just has to make sure they get posted correctly on the intranet. But she likes playing Godzilla with data, so to keep herself occupied she makes charts like Customers Who Don't Care, by City -- these are customers who signed up for the service but never use it -- and Customers with Substance Abuse Issues, by Neighborhood -- those who make large withdrawals every Friday and Saturday and have several overdrafts a month.

For some time, Stella printed out these satirical reports and hung them on the wall of her cube, and when people came by, people she liked, she would point them out and they'd have a laugh. But one day Chet came into her cube to ask her for a special report, and noticed a chart on her wall, a very official-looking one, titled Customers Likely To Go On Welfare, complete with a little explanatory legend that said *n=customer with avg. bal. decr. >5% per month over 18 month period*. Chet stood looking at this for more than a minute in silence, while Stella smirked encouragingly -- this was when she still had hopes for Chet, before he had proven himself to be an utter ass. The longer he looked at it, the funnier she found it, until she was struggling to keep from breaking into laughter. Finally, Chet turned to her.

"Stella," he said, "did someone ask for this report?"

Transforming her expression from ironic hilarity into a bland corporate cheer that would mirror his lack of affect but still express a perky willingness to assist him, she said, "Uh, well, someone asked for something like it. I just put a funny title on it."

Now Chet noticed the chart next to it, titled Lottery Winners Who Blew Their Chance, and the one under that, simply titled Crack Addicts. His mouth jerked in a little angry spasm. "These aren't funny," he said.

"Okay, Chet," she said, again carefully neutral, though his anger made her stomach flipflop and then vanish, as if Godzilla had extracted an illegal three-dimensional slice of her insides. "Sorry. I was just experimenting with the program's capabilities. I just wanted to see what I could make it do."

"I don't want to see these up here," he said, "ever again."

"Okay," she said. He left and she sat there quaking. A scolding always made her shiver. It didn't have to be from an authority figure, it could be from Chet to a Muni driver to Devon the coffee cashier. Once when she had handed over only three dollar bills instead of four, Devon said to her, with a hint of disdain, "You only gave me three," as if she were some kind of cheat, not the kind who hoped he wouldn't notice, but the kind who presumed on his beneficence, as if he would let the other 75 cents slide. She was so embarrassed that in her hurry to find three quarters she spilled all her coins out onto the floor of the lobby, and some rolled under the coffee cart. Then she was too embarrassed to get down on her hands and knees in front of everybody and search for them. She just handed over the 75 cents and fled, sans muffin or latte. It took her three days before she had the nerve to order coffee from Devon again.

Every embarrassing moment, she called a dump. The coffee incident she thought of as a five-dollar dump, since between the dropped coins and the abandoned breakfast that was how much she lost. A scolding by a Muni driver was a dollar-twenty-five dump. Chet's scolding was a fifty-dollar dump, but not because it cost her fifty dollars. It was simply larger in proportion.

She felt bad for a day and a half. But then she realized: Chet's not my boss. And he's not going to tell my boss -- what's he going to say? "Your data analyst Stella has a chart on her wall of customers who are Crack Addicts"? The only way you could say that to someone was with a little humor, and Chet showed no sense of humor, either that day or any other. He was just an uptight jerk with a stick up his ass, and he wasn't her boss. Consequently, she downgraded the incident to a ten-dollar dump.

Stella opened the internal web page with her charts -- the official ones showing real customer service stats, the ones that were automatically updated. They ran every night, so that Gregor and his bosses could view the latest information, not that it changed noticeably from day to day.

Of course, managers were asking for new statistics all the time. The sole email message addressed only to her this morning was from her boss, forwarding a request from his boss, who had forwarded it from some VP, who wanted to know how many customers used OnLine Banking for more than one of their accounts.

A one-off like that would take her, at most, thirty minutes; she would claim that it took her all morning. She fired up Prognos, pointed it at the customer cube, and when it asked her for Report Title, typed "Football-Watching Wife Beaters Who Got So Fat They Ordered a NordicTrak On Ebay." That reminded her -- StarryShine was now supposed to be on a diet. She opened another browser window, got into the blog, and began writing.