

It Wasn't About Race. ...Or Was It?

NARRATOR:

Jack Parsons placed the phone back on its cradle and pressed his fingers to his temples. That was his eleventh phone call about what had taken place yesterday between Hope Barrows and Dillon Johnson, two-hard working, valuable members of the firm. Each caller had been very upset and now the firm—or at least all the people under Jack's purview—seemed to be splitting into two angry camps with one group saying, "We won't work in a racist environment!" and the others saying, "If a woman can't feel safe in the parking lot of her own company, that's pretty sad."

The story was really quite simple. The basic facts were not in dispute. Hope, a partner at Fuller Fenton, had gone to the office on Sunday afternoon to get a jump on the workweek, as she often did. When she arrived at the parking garage, she swiped her access card and the exterior door opened. As she drove up to the inner gate - the usual point of security during business hours, when the garage door was open, Dillon pulled in under the exterior door as it was closing. Hope stopped at the gate and, instead of swiping her card, got out of her car and walked over to Dillon. She asked who he was and whether he belonged in the building. Dillon told her he was an associate at Fuller Fenton. Hope asked to see his identification, and he showed her his card. Hope thanked him, went back to her car, and entered the garage. Hope is Asian, and Dillon is black.

Dillon was angry—actually appalled. He had called Jack early that morning. He said that the incident was an indication that the firm was racially biased. Judging from the calls that Jack had received, most of the firm's African-American partners and associates agreed.

Jack asked Dillon to tell him exactly what had happened.

DILLON:

"I was working out at my health club when I received a call on my cell phone from another associate, Shaun Daniels. We had planned to meet at the office later that afternoon. Shaun asked if we could push our meeting because he had to be somewhere at 4:00 p.m. I said 'Sure,' grabbed my things and drove to the office straight from the gym.

"I pulled into the driveway of the company garage behind a new silver Volvo, and started looking through my clothes, which were in a pile on the passenger seat, for my wallet and my access card.

"Then the door opened, the Volvo went through, and I didn't even think: I just followed. Then the car stopped again. I thought, 'What is this?' and I tried to see who was in the car. I could see that it was a woman, and she was looking at me in her rearview mirror. So, I waved to her and then waited.

"She got out of her car, came over to me, and asked me if I work in the building. I said, 'Yes,' and she asked me for my identification. I recognized her, you know—I didn't know her name, but had seen her somewhere in the building.

"I was really confused. I didn't know what her problem was. Then I realized that she thought that I had slipped through the door behind her because I was some sort of criminal. I'm black, and she is Asian. Most people at the company are white. 'Case closed' in her mind.

"I told her my name, found my wallet, and showed her my identification. But Jack, I have to

tell you, at that moment, all I could think was that this wasn't the first time I had been made to feel like an outsider at this company because I am black. When I signed on, I heard a lot of talk about how Fuller Fenton was reinventing itself as an incredibly diverse, versatile organization. But my experience tells a different story.

"During my first week here, one of the administrative assistants saw my wedding photo that I have on my desk. She looked really surprised and then said, 'Your wife is very light skinned.'

"I laughed and said something like, 'Amy is white.' But you should have seen the look I got: it was disapproving, almost like she were disgusted." Dillon's voice becomes quieter. "I know I could cut her some slack: she is one of the older assistants, and she's been here a long time. But it stung. She hasn't talked to me directly since."

Dillon is quiet for another moment. "That was the smallest incident. After four months here, I was going to be on the team for that consumer goods company in Texas. Do you remember that I was put on and taken off within 48 hours? I later found out that the partner heading the team was worried that a black face would put the client off.

"Maybe the guy had a point; that client is a very old-line kind of company. But still, if this company is serious about diversity, is that any way to behave? That is not the kind of company I thought that I was joining, and it is certainly not the kind of company that I'm going to keep working for.

"I called four or five colleagues last night. I asked them if I was imagining this. They said 'no.' This time it can't just be water under the bridge, Jack."

NARRATOR:

Jack knew that the earlier story about the client was correct. In fact, he had argued with his partner about the way Dillon had been treated at that time. And he had hoped then that it would have been one of those things that he could work to prevent from happening again.

Jack reassured Dillon as best he could. He told Dillon that he was a valued employee, that he would do some digging, and that they would all work to resolve the situation. As soon as he hung up the phone, he called Hope and left a message asking her to come see him.

HOPE:

"I tried to call you earlier. I have heard a lot of rumors going around about what happened yesterday, and I have to tell you, I am completely shocked. I didn't ask for Dillon Johnson's identification because he was black. I asked for it because I was freaked out that a man was following me into the garage—a man who didn't seem to have an access card of his own.

"I was only concerned for my own safety. He could have been white, or purple, for all I cared. I thought that there was a good chance I was going to be robbed or even raped. Asking for identification was the fair thing to do."

NARRATOR:

Jack asks Hope to sit down and suggests she start from the beginning.

HOPE:

Hope takes a deep breath. "I often come into the office on Sundays. Occasionally, I will see other cars in the garage, and sometimes I'll see people coming and going.

"But I didn't recognize Dillon's Taurus, and I didn't recognize Dillon. What he thinking, Jack?"

Speaking indignantly, “I’m not the one who was insensitive here. Dillon Johnson was insensitive to me by ‘piggybacking’ behind me when I opened the garage door. Didn’t he know that any woman would feel vulnerable and potentially threatened if any man—or anybody, truth be told—evaded security measures to follow her into a deserted garage? Why didn’t he just wait the extra 15 seconds and use his own card?”

“You know, I really never should have gotten out of the car. I should have just called security. But I was thinking, ‘Better to confront him now than to put myself in the possible jeopardy deep in the garage with no one else around.

“To be honest with you, I was also thinking about two of my friends who have been mugged—one in a parking garage and the other on a subway platform. Neither was hurt. Well, my friend Alice strained her hand trying to twist away from the subway mugger, but she got off easy, considering. And I was thinking about what my husband asked me two years ago when I started coming here on Sundays. He asked if I was sure that it was safe to come in when the building was deserted. He asked me to carry a cell phone in my hand when I got out of the car. I had punched in 911, and my finger was on the send button.

“I did not *recognize* him, and I didn’t recognize his car. He was wearing a tank top tee-shirt, not that that matters, really. No one dresses up here on Sundays. Still, no one usually wears tank top tee-shirts, either. I did feel a little silly, at one point, before I got out of the car. I mean, I was telling myself that whoever it was, was just coming in to work and had been too lazy to get out his card. But being scared overruled feeling silly.

“And in no way—*no way*—was I acting out of any racial prejudice. Come on, Jack, this guy has some personal chip on his shoulder and he is putting all his baggage on me. I was scared, for heaven’s sake.”

NARRATOR:

Jack listened and, at the end of the meeting with Hope, told her that he would think about what to do. It was clear, he said, that she and Dillon should sit down in the same room to discuss the issue. He would set up the meeting and get back to her.

Questions for Discussion

1. If you were Jack, how would you have handled this situation?
2. Is it about race? Is it about something else?
3. What other elements of difference to you note in the story?