

The Disciplinary Hearing

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Summary: Perry discovers something surprising about his most problematic employee that changes his whole perspective.

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It was one of the parts of being editor-in-chief Perry disliked the most. Hiring people was always a throw of the dice, but he usually managed to make his point – or, as in the case with Clark Kent and Lois Lane, roll seven or eleven. He seldom needed to cut his losses and start over – or, as in this case, threaten to do so.

Perry sighed. This was not the way he'd thought he'd spend this Tuesday morning.

He picked up the phone and dialed an internal extension. The perky young lady who answered piped, "Daily Planet Employee Relations. This is Brenda Cooper. How may I help you?"

"I need a copy of an employment record."

"And your name and title, sir?"

"Perry White, Managing Editor for the Daily Planet."

"Yes, Mr. White, I can help you with that. Can you give me your most current manager's access code, please?"

"White seven-four-alpha-nine-nine."

"Yes, sir, I have it. One moment while the computer verifies – that's it. Which employee record do you need?"

Perry rattled off the name and employee number, then asked, "When can I expect it to get to my desk?"

Brenda paused, then replied, "The next inter-office delivery will be around three this afternoon, sir. If you need it sooner, you could send someone down here to pick it up. Please remember that this is Proprietary Employment Information and cannot be released outside the company without clearance from the Legal Department."

He almost smiled at the capital letters in her speech. "I understand. I'll send someone to pick it up. When will that packet be ready?"

"No more than ten minutes, Mr. White."

"Thank you, Brenda."

"Can you give me the name of the person who will pick up the folder? I can't give it to just anyone, you know."

"Of course. His name is James Olsen. He'll probably get there pretty quick, and don't let him flirt with you."

She laughed. "I'll be careful, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you today?"

He almost blurted out that she could take his place at the upcoming meeting with his employee, but he held back at the last second. "No, that's all I need today."

"Of course, Mr. White," she bubbled. "The folder you requested will be ready for pickup in ten minutes."

"Thank you again, Brenda. Bye."

Perry hung up the phone and leaned toward the open office door. "Olsen!"

In less than three seconds, Jimmy's face materialized in the doorway. "Yes, Chief?"

"I need you to go to Employee Relations and pick up a folder. Do *not* look inside it."

Jimmy's eyes grew round. "Uh – is it mine?"

"No, it's for someone else. If it's not ready when you get there, just sit and wait. The young lady said ten minutes at most."

"Got it. I've got to drop off some research to Kevin in Sports on floor three. Can I combine those trips?"

"Sure. Just bring back the folder. And don't tell anyone in the newsroom about this."

Jimmy frowned slightly. "Uh – sure. Um – is someone leaving?"

Perry focused his sternest glare on the young man's face and said, "No questions. Just do what you're told. You'll find out what it's about soon enough."

"Okay, Chief. I'm on my way. And my lips are sealed with Superglue."

Ralph Veeder was puzzled. The story on the pet clinic that he was working on didn't want to come together. He was certain they were a front for an illegal puppy mill, but there was something missing, some small but important thing, the thing that would pull all the various threads together into a coherent whole. All he had to do was find it.

He smiled. Perry would congratulate him. Eduardo would shake his hand and tell him he'd done a good job. Cat would smile fetchingly at him. Clark would smile that great smile and nod. Lois would grunt something that didn't sound like a complaint to Employee Relations about him.

He'd never meant to offend anyone in the newsroom, but it seemed as if that's all he managed to do. When he grabbed onto a story, everything else just fell out of focus for him. His single-mindedness and lack of patience had caused him trouble in third grade when he'd read ahead of his stumbling classmates and drawn the ire of the teacher when she found him going that much faster than the rest. When he'd tried to write science fiction in junior high, one of his classmates had found his notebook and read it aloud to the bullies and snooty girls. All of them had mocked him and he hadn't known how to respond. It had hurt him deeply that they hadn't respected him, and he'd had no idea why that was so. Nor did he know how to correct the situation.

He didn't get invited to parties because he had no idea how to behave. If he tried to be outgoing and friendly, others would be angry with him because they thought he was too pushy. If he stood against a wall and let the action swirl around him, he'd be accused of being uppity or being a party-pooper. He couldn't win either way, so his social life was just about zero.

His focus made it easy for people to sneak up on him and surprise him. There were always jokers in his peer group who made it their mission in life to make him jump out of his seat. He was too small and uncoordinated to seriously threaten anyone, so there was little incentive for those people to leave him alone. The few friends he had either couldn't or simply didn't stand up for him.

He didn't blame them. After all, he rarely stood up for himself.

He shook himself out of those unpleasant memories and started paging through his notes again. He'd find that missing piece if it—

"Hey, Ralph!"

Olsen's shout in his ear and jolt to his shoulder startled Ralph badly. He slapped the desktop with both hands and panted, "Don't do that!"

Olsen shrugged. "You didn't answer the first three times I called your name. Perry wants you in his office right now."

"Now?"

"That's what he said."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He just told me to tell you to come and see him."

"Uh – okay. Be right there."

The younger man scampered away on some other vital errand as Ralph considered the summons. Such a call had never meant

good news before, and he suspected it wasn't good news this time either. He'd probably offended someone else without realizing it.

Ralph picked up a pen and notebook – he still remembered the first time he'd been called to the Chief's office and had come empty-handed and would *never* do that again – screwed up his courage, and stood. He might be sticking his head into the lion's mouth, but he'd do it bravely.

Even if he got his head bitten off.

Perry lifted his head at the knock on his door and called out, "Come in."

Ralph leaned in. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Sir, huh? The man must know he's in trouble.

"Come in and close the door, Ralph. We need to chat."

Ralph slouched to the front of Perry's desk and stood almost at attention. "About what?"

"Sit down, okay? You're making me nervous just standing there like that."

Ralph sat. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

There it was, the almost puppy-like desire to please. Ralph either didn't understand how social graces worked or he didn't care. His co-workers found him cloying or standoffish with no middle ground, and the man had all but run out of chances.

The man was a good writer, and when he got his sources lined up correctly he could deliver a solid assignment, but he sometimes got sidetracked and pursued the wrong avenue of investigation. When he did that, it was hard to get him back on track.

Perry wanted to help Ralph, to get him to focus on the job more without blocking out everything else, but the reporter had received yet another personal complaint. Ralph had accumulated more accusations of harassment in the newsroom than any three other reporters who'd been there as long as he had.

Perry had to do something, even if it was permanent.

He didn't want to but he had to.

He put his elbows on his desk and leaned forward. "Ralph, we've had a couple of complaints from other reporters about your behavior. Specifically, they've said—"

Perry stopped when Ralph sighed, deflated, and slumped backward. The man closed his eyes and took a breath, then opened them and said, "What did I do this time?"

"You – you mean you don't know?"

Ralph slowly shook his head. "No, I don't know. I never know. I have no grasp of such things, none whatsoever." The man lifted his eyes and fixed Perry with a pleading look. "I've never told you this because I think a person's medical history should be private. But maybe that's caused more problems for me than I thought it would." He paused, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I – I have Asperger's Syndrome."

Perry frowned at him. "I don't understand. What is that?"

Ralph shifted in the chair and turned to one side. "It's not that big a deal, at least not usually. It makes me—"

"Wait a minute! Can other people catch it from you?"

Ralph was stunned for a second, then coughed out a strangled laugh. "No. It's not contagious. It's a form of autism."

"Autism? I thought that was kids who were geniuses in one thing and morons – I mean, not – um – skilled in anything else."

Ralph didn't seem offended by the slip. "A few are like that. Asperger's people are sometimes classed as high-functioning autistics. There's no medication for it, just therapies and group sessions and self-help techniques."

"Hmm. You sound as if you know a lot about it."

"I have to. I couldn't function at all if I didn't." He paused, then added, "And sometimes I don't function very well even with that knowledge."

This was brand-new information, and Perry needed to know more. Ralph wasn't a complete loss as a reporter, and if Perry understood him better he might be able to help the young man.

He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me more about this syndrome."

Ralph's eyebrows went up. "Seriously? You want to know more?"

"Yes. If there's a medical reason for your actions, I need to document it. And if I know what's going on with you, I can put you on assignments that maximize your abilities."

Ralph sighed, then nodded. "Okay. I'll give you the Cliff Notes' version."

"I have to start by saying everyone's mileage varies with these symptoms. Some have a few, some have them all, and some hide them well enough to fool you for quite a while."

Perry put his hand out and waved it. "Let's get started."

Ralph frowned slightly, then began speaking in a pedantic manner. "AS sufferers tend to be male by a wide margin, although there are females in the group. We tend to have poor fine muscle control, which means we write very sloppily. Sometimes I can't read my own notes. We also tend to have poor gross coordination, which means that vanishingly few AS people are professional or even high-caliber amateur athletes. As a kind of compensation, I guess, most AS people possess above-average intelligence, which is one of the reasons for the stereotype of the absent-minded professor or the brilliant but quirky intellectual with no social skills. A lot of those folks have Asperger's."

"We tend to focus on narrow bands of interest instead of being widely read or generally skilled. We also tend to ignore the outside world when we're focused on something."

Perry nodded. "That's why you jump when people walk up behind you while you're working, right?"

"Yes. And it really bothers me when people are behind me, moving around and talking. It draws my attention away from what I'm trying to focus on, and knowing that they're there breaks my concentration even when they're being quiet."

"That's why I'm lost at parties. There's just too much going on at once and I get overwhelmed with sensory input. I can't follow any single conversation, so I either act inappropriately or withdraw. I knew a guy in college who always ended up with his back in a corner so no one could sneak up on him. It was also so he could limit the number of people who could talk to him at one time."

Perry frowned. "That sounds a bit lonely to me."

"It can be. Usually is, in fact." Ralph took a deep breath and turned away for a moment, then spoke again. "We also have a hard time connecting on an emotional level. We tend to get too close too fast or not connect at all. If there was a weird kid in your high school or college who was also really smart, chances are he or she was AS."

Perry nodded. "Matter of fact, I can think of two right off the top of my head. Nice guys, both of them, but they were hard to talk to."

"If you have a friend who's AS, he or she probably won't be very good at small talk. But you won't find many as loyal or reliable, because real friends are so rare for us."

"They're precious, too, aren't they?"

"Yes. I have lots of acquaintances, very few real friends. And none of them work here."

The flat statement saddened Perry. "I'm sorry about that, Ralph. But I have to ask you why this is the first time I've heard about you having this condition? Why didn't you tell me before?"

Ralph clasped his hands in his lap and squirmed a little.

"Because I don't see this as a disability. Most psychologists don't think it's that big a deal either, but most of them don't have to live with it. AS is just something I have to deal with every day, just like Lois has to deal with being an attractive woman who men like to hit on, Steve Lombard has to deal with people who want to help him relive his college football glory days, and Jimmy has to deal with being short. Do I wish people would just accept me as I am

even though I'm an oddball? Of course I do. But it's irrational for me to require people to adapt to me all the time. I want to be one of the guys even though I know I won't ever be, not really. I just want to fit in and be normal."

Perry nodded. "I see. Let me think on all you've told me, and we'll meet again day after tomorrow. I have to do something to maintain order in the newsroom, but at the same time I want to be fair to you. Just – try to hunker down for the next couple of days, okay? What you said to Katie Walker probably wasn't as bad as she made it out to be, but she made a formal complaint so I have to respond in writing. Oh, and I'll need something from your doctor so I can make this official and legal."

Ralph nodded and exhaled in apparent relief. "Thank you. That's a lot better than I expected when I came in here. I thought you were going to put me on probation. Or something worse."

"Well, let's see if we can come to some mutually satisfactory arrangement. That sound good to you?"

The younger man smiled thinly. "It really does. Thank you again."

Perry put his hands on the desk and stood. "Now get back out there and run that veterinary story down! I expect you to produce some outstanding copy today."

Ralph smiled wider and stood. "I'll do my best. I still have some facts to verify before I send it in, though. I don't want a repeat of last January."

Perry winced at the reference to Lois' stint as editor. She'd had to slap Ralph down pretty hard when he'd tried to turn in a story that fell apart when she double-checked his assertions. Perry had backed Lois up, and Ralph had eventually promised to do due diligence on every article. Perry had to admit that the man had kept his word on that subject.

"I don't want it either. Now get back to work, young man!"

Ralph scooted out of the office and strode quickly across the newsroom. He had a bounce he'd lacked a few minutes before, and he settled into his chair and immediately focused on his work.

Perry wasn't sure just how to accommodate Ralph and his condition, but he'd do it somehow. Maybe he could move him to a desk in the corner of the room. That way it'd be harder for people to surprise him. Maybe he could chat with Dr. Friskin about it – without mentioning Ralph by name, of course. Surely she had some insights about people with Asperger's Syndrome, some advice on dealing with employees with AS.

Maybe there were others at the Planet with the same condition, just not as severe as Ralph's. Maybe he could help them too.

It wouldn't be easy, but now that he had a handle on the problem, he could work something out that would satisfy everyone. Ralph would probably have to apologize to Katie Walker publicly, but unfortunately he was probably used to doing that. Still, it might keep a letter of reprimand out of his personnel file.

Perry shook his head. He'd had the chance to work on a cattle ranch for real money back when he was deciding on which college to attend, and he'd turned it down because he'd thought herding cattle would be harder than journalism. He didn't know it at the time, of course, but the editor-in-chief of the Daily Planet's main job was at least as tough as herding angry wet cats.

Cattle would have been an easy walk in the tall grass by comparison.

THE END