

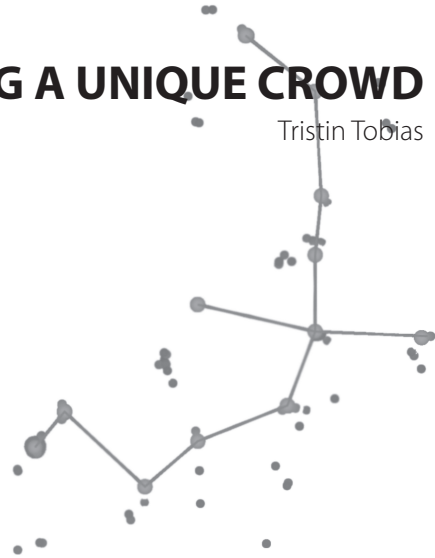
AMONG A UNIQUE CROWD

Tristin Tobias

It was five thirty-eight and I was sitting on the edge of my seat, anxious. To be fair, I was usually anxious. But today was not like other days. Usually I was anxious because of some really stupid little thing. Usually I was anxious and worried because I thought I would fail, or because I suspected someone thought poorly of me.

But, like I said, today was different. Today, this thing that was happening to all of us, it was more than I expected and more than I began to think I could endure. It had grown slowly, erupting and hatching like a dragon from an egg; it looked harmless enough at first, a silly and insignificant little hindrance cracking free from its bounds. Then the thing began to unfold, uncurl itself from its sleepy limbo and take flight before our eyes. I realized only then what danger we were all facing. We had kept silent in the face of an infant monster, and now the full-fledged creature stared us down, waiting for us to make our next move.

And I was a part of this thing and its consequences even though I had nothing to do with it, though I guess



we all had something to do with it. We saw it coming, but we had encouraged it along, stroked it into being.

I hadn't meant for it to go this far. None of us had. And the really scary thing was: I could feel it stirring the air around us and the ground beneath our feet. Somehow, it was getting bigger and more uncontrollable every moment since its first quiet awakening, affecting us all in a physical reaction we'd never expected.

I hadn't meant for this to happen, but it was happening now, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.



It was three twenty-seven, and I had just finished getting a good look at the room I had entered. Within a few short minutes of entering the brightly lit conference room, I had a feel for the

place. There was a single exit from the room, located in front of me and about two feet to my right. The room was mostly devoid of adornment, aside from the large, round, faux-wood table in the middle, surrounded by five chairs. The walls were a brilliant white, which made me uncomfortably alert and unbearably conscious of all the minute details. On the one hand, it was a boring room that gave me almost nothing to think about; on the other, it was a demanding space that left no room for lethargy.

To my left sat a heavysset black woman. She was quiet and austere dressed, in an ivory turtleneck and ankle-length black skirt. She wore low slung heels and studded earrings. She hadn't said a word since we'd both arrived, nearly at the same time. She was majestic and regal in her own way, though I couldn't exactly explain why I thought so. It was simply an aura she cast; one of quiet power and expectation. She was by far the most intimidating of the bunch of us; I came to see, as the other new employees began to pile into the room.

To the woman's left sat an Asian man, dressed in loose-fitting khaki pants and a collared shirt, left undone at the top. The shirt wasn't a business-style starched polo; rather it was of the casual button-down variety. Though it was un-patterned, the shirt was a shade of electric blue, dazzling and comfortable-looking, though not cheap by any means. The

man looked to be about thirty and was somewhat stocky, though he walked more quickly than anyone else in the room. He had entered exactly on time, not a moment early or late. On entering, he hadn't spoken but had given us a quick nod of acknowledgement. Then he sat swiftly in the chair, ready for business.

To the man's left, almost directly across from me but slightly to my right, was the only empty seat in the room. It was a nicer chair than the others, with arm rests and a padded back. It swiveled slightly when the Asian man had entered and knocked it by accident. Obviously it was for the boss, whenever he or she decided to show up.

Next to the empty chair was the last of us new employees: a young Hispanic man, my age or slightly older, although he looked as though his years had been harder and longer than mine ever would be. His eyes were sunken, and his skin looked paler than it ought to be, like he needed nourishment or sleep. The young man was crisply dressed in contrast to his less-than-alert demeanor; he wore a fitted black suit, complete with a silvery green tie and a crisp white button-down, buttoned to the top. His black shoes were shiny, polished even, and his hair was a slicked back spectacle of gel. He looked professional, though I suspected he was more desperate than he wanted to let on. He hadn't said a word either, though he looked

so profoundly relieved when he ran in and saw that we were still waiting, four minutes past three-thirty, that I could practically read his mind. Thank God, said his expression, happy and relieved at once.

Then there was me, dressed carefully in a white silk blouse and pinstriped black pants, close-toed heels and delicate silver jewelry. I had plaited my hair loosely and let it hang down my back, though I had ruthlessly pinned back would-be fly-aways. I looked professional but pretty, I hoped. I wanted to send the message I am firm, but have immaculate taste in style. I thought that in that regard at least, I had succeeded, but I also wished silently that I could look relaxed. I knew I didn't. I looked professional, and hopefully pretty, and like I was trying to look professional and pretty... like I needed to look that way because I was nervous and self-conscious. I wasn't fooling anyone. I wasn't poised. I was anxious despite all my efforts to remain calm.

But I was doing my best, and that just had to count for something.

After a few more moments, my hands started to shake, ever so slightly. I tried to stop them, only to realize my knee was precariously close to bouncing. A nervous tick was all I needed. I forced myself to stay still. This was my chance; I had to show them that I was a good choice for the job, that they wouldn't regret hiring someone with no experience to speak of and a

difficult schedule to accommodate. I was worth it. I just had to show them that I was.

I was Ara, strong and resilient. I could do it.

The door swung open with a resounding bang and I couldn't help but sit up slightly straighter in my chair. I tried to compose myself. The moment had arrived.

Emily was a tall, model-thin redhead with startling blue eyes and a smile glued in place. I knew her name was Emily because she was the one who had hired me, almost a week ago, and her countenance wasn't one so easily forgotten. She looked exactly the same as she had before; I reflected that she had first struck me as no-nonsense. Today wasn't any different. Her hair had been perfectly styled into pin-straight smoothness. The cut was short and edgy. Overall it was a harsh look for her... a mirror of her angular features and sharp jaw. Her nails were well manicured and she was immaculately dressed in a navy business suit with a knee-length pencil skirt. She wore heels even taller than mine—a startling three inches that gave her an overall height of just under six feet. She looked mean, for lack of a better word. She looked mean and just like the kind of person I would not want to ask for help. Her stern countenance never faltered as her eyes swept the room in a cursory kind of way.

I shivered as her gaze swept over

me. So it would begin.

Emily stayed quiet for an agonizing minute; it was as though she was savoring the absolute authority she held in that moment. We all had our eyes on her, fixed, waiting for her to say something. Finally she spoke, breaking the silence that had hung in the room, like clouds hovering over a brilliant sun.

“Welcome to Orientation.” If ever words spoken and the tone of the same words didn’t agree, it was now. Emily was obviously not looking forward to this meeting. She carelessly threw several blank name tags onto the middle of the table, with a handful of black Sharpies. “Print your names clearly,” she finished, huffily. “I need to be able to tell who you are. For those of you who don’t remember, my name is Emily.” I noticed she did not keep a nametag for herself.

I was the first one to reach for a sticker and pen. The Asian man quickly followed, and eventually everyone had a clearly printed sticker on their shirts. The room, if it were even possible, became even quieter than before. We waited, poised as though on the penultimate step before a great fall.

“I would like to begin by going over some basic company policies.” And so she began a long and boring tirade into company ethics, associate benefits, company reputation, and all sorts of administrative platitudes. We listened “aptly” – with glazed

eyes and slackened mouths. When she stopped to question us at infrequent intervals, we gave short and uninterested responses. She seemed satisfied enough with this, so I tried not to worry that I hadn’t had clever answers to her boring questions.

This process continued for some length of time. We stayed quiet and uninterested for the presentation’s majority.

That is, until Executive Emily came to the segment on equal opportunities and employee diversity. Instantly, the Hispanic named Max snapped alert. Obviously, it was a touchy subject for him.

As could only be expected, Max’s attention roused everyone else’s—the majestic black woman Joleen, the comfortably-dressed Asian Simon, and lastly, me—the seventeen-year-old Arab girl with a hint of a stubborn accent around the edges (though I’d been speaking English for nearly as long as Arabic).

Emily, obviously caught off-guard by her audience’s stirring, paused briefly. She looked panicked for a split second, but then seemed to catch herself and recovered her stern demeanor. For reasons I wasn’t sure, Emily’s action surprised and confused me. But then my attention was diverted as she jumped ahead to Amber & Co.’s internal promotion policy, in a clear attempt to restore the dynamic.

She didn’t get very far.

“Wait...” interrupted Max, running one distracted hand through his gelled hair. “Wait a minute. Are you saying that your diversity policy is the only reason you had to hire all of us?” He pointed around the table and then at himself as he said this, indicating the different races we all represented. I was mortified on his behalf. That was just not something people noted aloud. Sure, we’d all noticed the diversity. It was obvious. But who in their right mind spoke up about it on their first day at a new job? Plus, diversity was a good thing. It was good that we were all there.

Emily looked a little like she wanted to jump over the table and throttle Max with her perfectly manicured hands. She didn’t, of course, but she did look supremely irritated at the interruption. I sat rigid in my chair, waiting for her reaction. My nerves were kicking in worse than before. I tried to stay calm.

“It was not company policy at all,” she said with balled fists and an icy voice, looking directly at Max as she did so. Her fury was intimidating, though I couldn’t see where it had come from.

“So you didn’t want to hire us?” he replied, incredulously. I turned to stare at him. I couldn’t help it. He must have been crazy to pull something like that. I could feel the anxiety pooling in my stomach.

Emily looked as though her patience

was being tried. “That’s not what I meant”—she paused, and in an obvious motion searched for his name, as though it were inconsequential and forgettable—“Max. I simply meant that this particular company policy had nothing to do with the choices for the new hires.”

He said nothing, but looked furious. I was furious at him. He was messing everything up, pissing off the woman in charge. It was unacceptable.

I gave him my best death glare, hoping he would shut up and let the moment of awkwardness pass us by. To my intense and unpleasant surprise, another voice reprimanded Emily in her moment of weakness.

“But if it’s company policy, how can you say that it had nothing to do with who got hired? I mean, look at us. We’re obviously diverse. Too diverse, even. Like we’re sending a message just for

I was in shock, immobile, staring in horror at what had just happened—in so small an amount of time, no less.

the sake of it.” Simon’s face remained calm as he said this, as though it was just a passing thought that he decided to share rather than a direct challenge of Emily’s statement and judgment.

Emily looked more shocked than even me at this interruption, but only slightly, I’m sure. This was not what I’d wanted—or expected—on my first day.

“Guys—let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth, okay? We all have jobs.

That's what matters." My own voice sounded small and insignificant next to the others in the room, but I held my head high.

"Yes. Exactly." Emily faltered. She cleared her throat, obviously steeling herself to plough through and onward. She opened her mouth to begin again... when it happened.

A loud buzzing noise filled the room, groaning as though aware of our current discomfort. I looked up and directly at Emily. She pulled a small black cell phone out of her pocket.

"I have to take this," she said. "When I return, we will be moving on to internal promotion. Excuse me." She hastily exited the room.

As soon as the door was closed behind Emily, Max started up again.

"Can you believe her? I mean, really? Just ... wow. That's all I've got to say." He shook his head in disgust, and then ran a hand through his hair again.

"Well, it's not really her fault. She's just doing her job. The company says, 'hire some people who aren't white.' What's she going to do? She's just doing what we'd all do."

I tended to agree, so I stayed silent.

"Nah, man." He paused, and shook his head again. "Nah. She's acting on her own. To look good to the higher-ups. You know she is, man. Just look at her. She's ambitious as hell."

"We don't know that." Simon disagreed. "There's no way at all we could know that."

"Yeah there is. It's obvious, and it's discrimination. You know I have two buddies who were just as qualified as me? Yeah. They don't have jobs. And you know why? 'Cuz they're Mexican, too—but I had the job already... so, check! That spot's been filled, sorry.

"It's just so messed up. I hate that kind of thing. It just gets me all worked up." He grunted one last time. Then he was quiet.

Normally, I would've let this kind of thing die out on its own. But I was kind of pissed. I deserved my job. I worked hard for it and interviewed for it, and I wasn't just some check mark on a corporate list.

"It's not like that. That's reverse discrimination and it's against the law." My voice rose. "We deserve to be here, all of us. I don't care if it's entry level at a department store. I just don't. Times are hard, and jobs are scarce. We made it out of like 40 applicants. We deserve what we got. We aren't incidental."

Max leaned forward ever so slightly in his chair.

"Look around," he whispered, "and deny it again." I did look, and I saw four people in obviously varied skin tone, age group, and gender.

We were utterly different.

"I dare you to deny it again." Coward as I was, I said nothing. He continued:

"Ara, right? What are you, like, Middle-Eastern? I know you have to be facing discrimination these days. I've been called a 'wetback' more times than I

can remember. And life isn't exactly easy for the elderly and the African-Americans."—he looked pointedly at Joleen, and then shifted his gaze to Simon—"And I know you've got to have people wondering why you're working for a clothing store, man. Aren't Asians supposed to be the smart guys?" His tone was sickening, and mocking, but we couldn't exactly deny what he was saying. After all, we did face assumptions like that every day of our existences. Perhaps that was our only unifying factor, that we'd all been judged according to how we looked on the outside. It was a depressing thought.

It was quiet for a moment. But then Simon jumped back into the conversation with a huff.

"You know what? No. That's ridiculous. Where do you get off? I don't know why you can't just accept that we're all here and lucky for it! Why are you even complaining? It's like she"—he indicated me—"said before. Why be an ingrate for something you're damn lucky to have? It's disrespectful suggesting that we didn't earn this—even if it is entry-level."

"Now wait a second! Who the hell are you to say I'm being disrespectful? I'm not saying that stuff is true, just pointing out what gets said all the time by everyone else! You're the one throwing around insults like 'ingrate'—not me." He snorted in derision. "Asshole..."

Simon shook his head, disgusted

and unbelieving.

"Typical," he muttered, under his breath.

It was loud enough for Max to hear.

"That's it! I knew it! I know a racist when I see one!" He stood from his chair and started heading toward Simon. I was in shock, immobile, staring in horror at what had just happened—in so small an amount of time, no less.

"Oh, you know one when you see one? When you see one? Ha! Not stereotyping, are you?" Simon stood up as well. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but I was afraid. This wasn't at all how I'd wanted things to go. But I didn't dare interfere now. It was too late to stop the conversation—and its repercussions—in its tracks.

It was five thirty-eight.

I began to think the world would collapse around me any second, blowing my chances at the fresh start I'd hoped for at my new job.

I was five thirty-eight and Joleen, silent until now and as graceful as a dove, stood up from her chair.

"Enough!" Her voice was strong and urgent, harsh and strained, but smooth beyond measure. It held a power closer to supernatural than to natural, though it was the most natural voice I'd heard all day. "Enough already. Everyone just sit down. Y'all are awful dramatic."

There was a moment of the quietest quiet I'd ever heard. For a single moment, I dared hope that everything

would settle back into normalcy, that we would all get along, that we would laugh this whole thing off and chalk it up to nerves and fear. I simply and truly hoped that everything would work out like it was supposed to.

But then the drama erupted tenfold. Max had disregarded Joleen altogether and was heading toward Simon with a look of death on his desperate face.

I rose from my chair straining to get away from the fray. Simon and Max were screaming at each other, full-throttle. Joleen was trying to calm everything down. I was trying to speak reason.

“You stupid, ignorant, little—”

“You did not just call me a—”

“Wait, guys, come on. This is ridic—”

“By heavens, if you two don’t stop this instant—”

Max raised his arms to shove Simon against the wall.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Emily was back. And she was angry.

Before anyone could answer, before anyone could even draw breath to form a single word of explanation, the ground exploded under our feet.

Literally.

My first thought was that it was some cosmic thing, mimicking our resentment and turmoil, realizing our fears and prejudices and judgments. It had to be some immense backlash—God’s wrath or the Earth’s fury or the Universe’s horror at the way we’d treated our

fellow humans. Or else it was our own hatred spilling out of us and onto the floor at our feet...

But of course that wasn’t it at all.

It was an earthquake.

The earthquake—earthquake, by God!—was drawn-out and violent. It tore the floor apart and rattled the overhead lighting, which flickered as the angry air stirred all around us. Disbelieving, we scurried under the center table, yell-

**I was unique among a unique crowd.
The realization was sudden and liberating.**

ing and cursing and screaming as we did. Somewhere in the adjacent room there was a loud crash, and then the lights went out.

Everything was moving and in the darkness I could barely make out the four other people in the room. I was so scared I wanted to cry, but I didn’t. For who would understand my tears right now? Who would understand compassion, or care about the suffering of another? We had just broken out into an epic fight that was centuries old and hostile to the core. We were huddled together under that table, less than a few inches apart... yet each of us was utterly alone.

Minutes trickled by. My heart grew heavier with each weary thump it made, reminding me of the value I placed on life. What if we never made it out of the darkness? What if the stained gray carpet was the last thing I ever looked at?

As I resigned myself to fear and misery, I suddenly felt a warm hand on my own. As I looked up into Joleen's maternal face, I felt a small trickle of hope. At least I wasn't all alone.

At least there was another human being on this Earth that cared...

And then, without warning, the quake came to a sudden halt. Relief coursed through me. I felt like a condemned person given a pardon, or like a bird that fell from its nest only to remember that it could fly. The relief was wondrous and heady. I took a deep breath. Even the air smelled fresher, more invigorating.

I looked up and around, trying to get my bearings. It was still relatively dark in the room, but my eyes began to adjust with each passing second.

And then I saw everything more clearly than before. Perhaps it was the relief coursing through my veins, making me optimistic and happy. But in that moment, caressed in darkness, we all looked alike. We were just survivors under a faux-wood table, all looking around in profound relief.

Joleen still comfortably held my hand in her own, but her facial expression was anxious, like mine had been. Simon and Max were both supporting Emily's unconscious form; she appeared to have hit her head during the quake. The two were bent over her, silently trying to rouse and care for her. Alarm shot through me, momentarily dampening my relief. Suppose she died?

Suppose Executive Emily, who we had been so happy to criticize before, was now critically injured? My stomach fell at the thought.

After a moment, though, Emily stirred slightly, and both men looked relieved. Their relief echoed across Joleen's lined face, and I'm sure across mine as well. Stirring didn't mean Emily was unhurt, but at least she wasn't unresponsive.

We all were profoundly happy when she opened her eyes and looked around. Max and Simon seemed to put aside their differences for the moment and then began discussing how to get out of the building. As it turned out, the mysterious crash from the other room had been the sound of a file cabinet falling over in front of the locked door (Emily's keys still in the doorknob, on the other side), effectively blocking us in.

Max and Simon talked effectively—to my profound surprise—with Emily and Joleen throwing in their respective opinions at odd intervals. There was a moment where Simon looked at Max, and Max looked back at Simon, and an unspoken communication passed between the two of them. I couldn't tell what it was exactly, this male understanding, but I could see the difference right away.

Somehow, all the anger and the prejudice had shifted with the earthquake. Somehow, the men related on some basic level, or some ancient

survival instinct. Somehow, they had passed over the hatred. I was glad of it.

Finally the solution was reached to try and take the door off its hinges after attempting to unlock it.

Only I was still in complete awe, silent and marveling. We had gone from resentful representatives of diversity to a unit of people set on a goal, to help one of the “non-diversity,” no less. It was astonishing. I had seen the change take place. I had been a part of the change itself. But it was mysterious to me.

It was mysterious, and absolutely beautiful.

So without further ado, I set to work, helping Simon place Emily comfortably where she wouldn't have to move too much. Then I turned to Max and handed him the pins from my hair, so that he could work on the door. My heart was light, though we were momentarily trapped in the stuffy room. Somehow, we'd find a way. If we'd survived thus far, we could surely find a way out of the predicament we now faced.

My nerves had left me far behind. Somewhere, far away it seemed, I had lost them, dropped them on the floor, only to look back and see them sitting sullenly, quietly defeated, abandoned. It was too late to return for them... too late to regret their loss. I never again needed to worry about someone else's silent judgments. I was past judging

and prejudging and worrying about anyone else's thoughts about me. The thoughts only led to anger and violence. Maybe that was why Simon and Max had been able to let them go.

I was Ara, strong and resilient... and it didn't matter what anyone else thought.

I was Arab by race, Egyptian by ethnicity, Christian by religion, Coptic by heritage, adolescent by age, female by gender, American by birth... and human by nature.

I was me, and I was glad of it. I liked who I was.

Yet I also recognized that I was more like my fellow man than unlike. I was more human than not. I was separate and distinct and unique culturally, but it was a difference like any of my others; in the same way that I was tall and brunette and seventeen, I was a Christian Arab. My distinctions were facts, not taboos. Everyone had different facts that were true about them, and I accepted that as an essential part of humanity. I could compare my facts to others' as much as I wanted, but no one's facts were better than anyone else's. They were all true, and that was that. And there was no need to worry about it.

I was the same as all the people around me. I was unique among a unique crowd. The realization was sudden and liberating.

On the same day that the Earth had rocked my physical being, my whole

world stood completely still in silent, compelling revelation. I would not forget.



We did all get out of the room alive; even Executive Emily came out with just a minor concussion and some scratches. I became quite friendly with all of the people who had been at the orientation that day—we were a legend amongst the other workers.

You wouldn't believe the respect that comes with surviving a natural disaster and saving a manager's life (or so the rumors went). I stayed at Amber & Co. for a year and a half before I moved away. I hear that Joleen is still working there, happy as a clam, but everyone else has moved up, on, or out. I have to say, I had many good days working there, especially with my new mindset of not letting anyone intimidate me with their opinion.

And when I inevitably did forget—in the stress of the moment and only ever briefly—what I'd learned, life had a way of reminding me what I had realized on the day that the earthquake struck. People were all just people.

That attitude served me well many,

many times.

I'd heard others say that an earthquake had changed their lives, but they never meant it in the way I did. I garnered something positive. They always talked about the death and destruction. What could I say? I had my own perspective. I was lucky. When it came to my earthquake experience, the only thing that died was my nervous predisposition, and the only destruction was that of my preconceptions. In my earthquake—and it may seem obvious—things simply got shaken up.