

International Reality Consultants, LTD.

REALITY: WHAT'S HOT
AND WHAT'S NOT

by Amy Vaughan

HAD SOMEONE TOLD ME ABOUT IT, I WOULDN'T have believed them, but the crisp red letters spelling out "INTERNATIONAL REALITY CONSULTANTS, LTD." emblazoned on a background of white were too concrete for me to dismiss immediately. My curiosity got the better of me, and putting my other errands out of my mind, I pushed open the simple glass door and stepped over the threshold of the building with such an odd name.

The scene that greeted me was not out of place in today's corporate America. A desk where I assumed a secretary normally sat was empty, and as I walked past I saw a note that read: LUNCH. BACK IN 15. —MARYANN

Rows of occupied cubicles took up most of the space of this relatively simple office, but there seemed to be one desk at the center of it. I'd managed to come this far unquestioned, so I continued toward that central desk. Sitting at it was a man well over the hill, dressed in a short-sleeve dress shirt and a tie that didn't match. He was so engrossed in whatever conversation he was having on the phone that he didn't notice me, and I took advantage of it.

"—are you kidding me? That's an *awful* idea for a television show. No one'll ever believe it! Goody Two-Shoes are out this year! Bad girls are *in!* Out with the *virtue*, in with the *vice*, do you hear me? Who cares about the moral high ground anymore?"



Nobody, that's who. Listen, you're doing all this brainwork for a target audience that just doesn't exist! Take my word for it. If you can corrupt the little virtuosos in the process, even better! What do you mean, that's not what 'virtuoso' means? It's got the word 'virtue' in it, doesn't it? Oh, please, that doesn't make any sense at all! Goodbye!"

He slammed the phone down. A nasal feminine voice issued from his phone almost immediately afterward.

"Call from Madrid, sir, line seven."

He picked the phone back up and, to my surprise, was silent. But not for long. "A *peace treaty*? Are you kidding me? That is so World War II! You're living in a fairy tale! It's all about strife now, mi amigo! Why do you think America invaded Iraq, huh? We've got to be the trendsetters in this place! Oh, come on! I'll have you know that President Dubya calls me twice a week! Listen, why don't you invade France? What do you mean, your army's in bad shape? Just step over with a couple AK-47s or whatever it is you people have, and they'll surrender! Trust me! They always surrender! You don't even need a defense budget for that! Just a couple guns and a few Joes, or Joses, or whatever. Ahh, you'll see, no one'll believe you want peace for a second. Adios!"

He hung up the phone as carelessly as before, and began muttering under his breath.

"Jeez, the people in this place... Couldn't spot reality if it walked right under their noses!"

I was starting to think this really was some kind of joke. It was absolutely ludicrous. I stepped forward, and he finally saw me. Our eyes met.

"Yeah?"

I spoke up, rather quietly, so as not to be rude.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to get your opinion on something... What do you think of the idea of a man, or even a whole agency, that gets paid to tell people what is and isn't real?"

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. Clearly this was a question that took a bit of thinking.

He answered after a moment's pause, in a tone that almost matched mine.

"A guy that gets paid to tell people what to believe?" he echoed, sounding slightly incredulous. "I'd never buy into that!"

"OK," I replied, and as the second syllable left my lips, the man simply disappeared into thin air.

Seconds later, the desk went. Then the cubicles, one by one. Then the secretary's desk.

Then the building itself was gone, and I found myself outside. Instead of the building I'd seen before,

I saw a sandwich shop. I realized that it was nearing lunchtime, and I was hungry.

A sign had been painted on the inside of the shop's windows, advertising the New Sushi Hoagie! Like Real California Roll! Try Our Bluefin Surprise!

"A sushi hoagie?" a voice asked from over my shoulder.

Someone had come up behind me where I stood paused before the store. A seemingly random middle-aged businessman who must've passed this way seeking lunch. He had the most perfect look of incredulity on his face, and seeing it, I couldn't help but smile.

"I'd never believe that," he continued, shaking his head. "But you know these days... you can't turn a corner without seeing something completely outrageous. You'd think someone would start telling them that they need to get a grip on reality." ■



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Amy Vaughan



AGE

16

GRADE

11

HOMETOWN

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FAVORITE BOOK

***The Surgeon's Mate*, by Patrick O'Brian**

HOW SHE GOT THE IDEA FOR THE STORY

A friend gave her the title, and about fifteen minutes later, she had thought out a thousand words worth of story.

DOES AMY WANT TO BE A WRITER?

"Yes, please."

OTHER INTERESTS

Taekwon-do, watersports, learning new languages.