

Mary's Small Batch Maidens

by Didier Smith

1. Due Diligence

“Entertainment, years zero to four. You use *Cocomelon*, right?”

Tyler dug his fingernails into his arm. If he’d known the due diligence process would be such a pain in the ass, he’d never have considered the buyout.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s incredibly soothing.”

The prick in the suit shook his head and pointed at a line item in the financial statement. “So’s *Sesame Street*, and that’s public domain. Your licensing costs for *Cocomelon* are over fifty grand a year.”

What an idiot. His MBA program may have taught him how to read spreadsheets, but he clearly didn’t understand the first thing about the industry.

“No one uses *Sesame Street*,” Tyler said. “It’s insufficiently captivating. The increased tranq costs alone will exceed 50k - not to mention the impact on the final product.”

“We use *Sesame Street*.”

Which is why your products are shit, Tyler thought. “Well, I guess you’re the expert. Feel free to change it once the deal closes.”

The prick continued scanning the financial statement and burst out laughing. “Goat milk? Jesus Christ, Mr. Miskewitz. No wonder you’re going under. Fuck me, three million a year?”

Tyler felt himself getting hot. “It’s organic. We need the certification.”

“You don’t need goat milk to be certified. Organic soy and mealworms will do fine.”

“It’s part of our brand. Mary’s Small Batch Maidens is a premium product.”

“Mary’s Small Batch Maidens is a bankrupt business,” the prick said, waving the stack of papers around. “You can exceed industry norms in one dimension, maybe two. Build it into your brand, charge a little extra. But licensed childhood entertainment, *and* goat milk, *and* a sixteen-year maturation? With all due respect, Mr. Miskewitz, your business is completely fucked.”

“Screw you,” Tyler said. He didn’t have an actual retort - truth be told, his business was indeed completely fucked. That’s why he was sitting across from this Unimaiden finance prick in the first place. He sat in silence as the suited dickhead continued scanning the statement, chuckling and shaking his head.

After fifteen uncomfortable minutes, the prick finally put down the stack of paper. “Well there’s a ton of inadvisable costs, but I don’t see anything illegal. Shall we tour the floor?”

“Yes,” Tyler said, eager to get out of his office. “Follow me.”

2. The Floor

“Morning, Mr. Miskewitz,” the security guard greeted him as they entered the foyer. “Who have we got here?”

“He’s from Unimaiden,” Tyler said, and nodded at the prick. “Our esteemed guest.”

“Of course,” the security guard smiled. “You don’t happen to have ID on you?” he asked the esteemed guest.

The security guard hummed a little as he copied the prick’s ID number into the visitor log. He didn’t seem too stressed - he’d probably already realized that the facility would still need security post-merger. Likely even more.

“Here you go,” the guard said as he handed the prick’s driver’s license back. “Hope you like what you see.”

“I can’t wait,” the prick replied. “Let’s start with the hatchery.”

The security guard pressed the button on his desk and a door opened on the left side of the foyer.

Tyler led the prick into the corridor. The doors closed behind them, and a second set opened in front. Preparing himself for more ridicule, Tyler steeled his nerves and led the prick into the darkness of the hatchery.

“You can’t be serious,” the prick said, after their eyes had adjusted to the dim amber light. “Are these the wombs?”

“What?” Tyler asked. “They’re top of the line.”

“They’re singles! Top of the line for a mom and pop shop, maybe. How many you running?”

“Eight hundred.”

The prick burst out laughing. “Eight hundred individual wombs! You never heard of batch processing?”

“Individual processing allows us to target each specimen’s unique needs, ensuring optimal-”

“Cut the marketing shit, Mr. Miskewitz. Fetuses don’t have unique needs. Oxygen, carbon, vitamins and minerals, just like every other mammal. Let me guess, you could never afford the capital expenditure of upgrading to batch?”

“We tune our folate supply according to the unique genetic makeup of-”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. We’ll take care of it. Show me the nursery.”

Tyler swallowed his pride and led the prick past the mismatched racks of single wombs. They really had all been top-of-the-line - back when they were new. Now that the oldest generations were long past their warranty periods and one of the main womb vendors had gone out of business, an increasing fraction of the equipment was held together with Flex-Seal and crossed fingers. Still - if it ain’t broke. . .

The delivery room was empty - still twelve weeks until Batch 46 was ready. Then it would be a madhouse for five days - the place would be crawling with temps running back and forth, cracking open the eggs and hooking the bubs up. Gastric tube, catheter, poop chute,

Cocomelon. Not complicated, but someone always managed to screw it up. Historical data indicated an expected 95% yield - 760 bubs for the nursery.

“Looks clean,” remarked the prick. No other comments.

The nursery was bustling. Batch 45 was in that awkward phase where some of them were starting to crawl, but others were content to lie on their backs all day, happily absorbing the hypnotic melodies and visuals of *Cocomelon*. Waste tubes had to come out of the crawlers, or they’d get tangled. Dozens of nurses in purple scrubs chased after the crawlers, keeping them from hurting themselves, changing their diapers, and pumping fortified organic goat milk into their gastric tubes.

“They’re differentiating,” the prick remarked. “Looks labour intensive.”

Tyler nodded. “It’s the most expensive stage in the process,” he said. “But it’s only for a few weeks.”

“Are these nurses temp?”

“No. The work is too specialized. We reallocate them from the other batches and just go light on supervision for a month.”

The prick shook his head. “You never studied process engineering, did you? This is where you should go continuous. Graduate the items immediately when they start crawling. Your single wombs could actually help here - if you spread out the load, you’d have constant resource demand instead of these insane spikes.”

“The word ‘batch’ is literally in our name. It’s not Mary’s Continuous Process Maidens.”

The prick laughed and changed the subject. “Do you rotate the staff?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

“We allocate them randomly every morning,” Tyler said, repeating the line from ISO 36363 - Human Husbandry. “Fully in line with industry standards.”

“And how do you ensure they actually go to their assigned posts?”

Tyler flushed. “Security cameras,” he said. “Facial recognition software.”

The prick nodded. “Regulations are written in blood.” He moved on, striding onto the nursery floor. Thank God he didn’t notice Tyler’s embarrassment. It wasn’t a total lie - the security cameras really did have facial recognition software. Of course, the employees had thrown a shit fit when he’d installed it a decade ago. It had been disabled ever since.

“Nice genetics,” the prick remarked, leaning over one of the items. “Public domain?”

Tyler shook his head. “23andme.”

The prick rolled his eyes and made a note in his notebook.

3. ISO 36363

Tyler waved the prick goodbye and returned to his office, alone. He immediately logged on to the security system and re-enabled facial recognition.

Fuck. The nurses were all over the place. Practically none were at their assigned stations. However the hell they'd picked their stations, it sure wasn't ISO 36363-compliant.

He got on the phone to the security company.

"Yes, hello. Tyler Miskewitz, Mary's Small Batch Maidens... No, he's been doing great, thanks. I was hoping I could have some additional personnel... No, temporary. Two weeks, max."

They quoted him an outrageous number. "Surge pricing," they called it. It was a third of Mary's Small Batch Maidens' remaining runway. But if this deal failed DD...

He wired through the payment and went home to bed.

When he got back in the next morning, all hell had broken loose. A crowd of angry nurses were at his office door, shouting. They turned their attention to him as soon as he appeared, while the useless rented security personnel stood limply back.

"What?" he shouted over the din.

The crowd quieted down. "Give us back our girls!" someone yelled.

"They're not your girls!" he retorted.

Cacophony ensued, even louder than before. Tyler shoved his way through the crowd and unlocked his office door. "Send in a representative and get back to work!" he shouted, before entering his office and slamming the door shut behind him.

The din quieted down as the nurses presumably saw reason and went back to work. Once they'd left, he heard a knock at his door. He opened it and saw one of his longest-serving nurses, standing alone in her purple scrubs.

"Hi Rose," he said.

"Nice to see you, Tyler," she replied.

"Come on in." Tyler returned to his desk and sat down in his mesh-backed office chair.

Rose entered his office and gently lowered her middle-aged frame into one of the guest chairs across from him.

"How can I help?" he asked.

She ignored him. "Why are all these security guards here?"

Tyler sighed. "You know about the acquisition, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what 'due diligence' means?"

"It means a bunch of paperwork for you," the aging nurse smiled. "But I don't see what it has to do with us."

“It means we have to demonstrate compliance with accepted industry standards, Rose.”

“We are in compliance.”

“Which includes post randomization.”

Rose bit her lip. “The posts are randomized. We get emails every morning, telling us where to go and which girls we’re minding.”

“And what do you do with those emails?”

She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw.

“Do you follow their instructions, Rose?”

Keeping her eyes closed, she shook her head slowly.

“Or do you just do whatever you want?”

Her eyes snapped open and locked onto his. “Fuck you, Tyler.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell those goons to piss off, and give me back my girls.”

Tyler was taken aback. The matronly old lady didn’t seem like the type. “Your girls?” he asked.

“Hayley and Elizabeth,” she said. “They’re in Batch 27.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Rose. You named them?”

“Everyone names them.”

“No way, Rose! You don’t name them! Everyone knows that - ISO 36363!”

The old nurse snarled and pushed herself out of her chair and onto her feet. “Damn you and your ISO 36363, Tyler!” she shouted, pointing across the desk at him. “We’ve all talked. If you don’t give us all back our girls, we’re going to unionize.”

The color drained from Tyler’s face. If anything could sink this deal faster than an ISO 36363 violation, it was a union. He took a deep breath. Tried to remember that negotiation seminar he’d attended at that conference, all those years ago. This wasn’t the time to act rashly.

“Rose,” he said. “Sit down. Do you know how screwed this business is?”

She remained standing. “Sounds like a you problem.”

He shook his head. “When a business runs out of money, Rose, it’s an everyone problem. You think I wanted this?”

She avoided his eyes and slumped a little, looking down at her feet.

“If this deal falls through, do you know what the next option is?”

“No.”

“Liquidation, Rose. Liquidation means you’re fired. Everyone’s fired. And your girls? Hayley and Elizabeth?”

She looked up at the sound of their names and met his eyes.

“Liquidated,” he said.

She looked down again and closed her eyes. She stood there in silence for ten long seconds, before pushing her chair back and turning towards the door.

“I’ll tell the other nurses to get back to work,” she said. “At their assigned posts.”

The defeated old lady shuffled out his door.

Tyler leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief. Fuck, what a day. Nurses. Hayley and Elizabeth. What next?

4. Finnigan's Roadhouse

The deal went through. After settling the company debts and delivering return to the investors, Tyler was left with just enough money to retire. Not enough for a hacienda on Mojito Island, but enough to pay his mortgage and never have to cook again. He spent his evenings at the one restaurant within stumbling distance to his condo - Finnigan's Roadhouse.

Crunch, crunch. Tyler looked up from his phone as the sound of peanut shells being crushed underfoot signaled the arrival of his steak.

"Evening, Tyler," the waitress said. "16oz ribeye, medium rare?"

"Thanks, sweetheart."

"Can I get you anything else?"

"Another Coors?"

"You got it."

He put his phone down next to his plate so he could continue reading the news as he cut up his ribeye. He'd obsessively followed Unimaiden for the first few months after the close. They'd started the girls on hormones immediately. Dragged maturation down to twelve and sold off the older batches. Eventually, he couldn't bring himself to read any more updates and had turned to reading local gossip instead.

Hm. Looked like someone had been murdered in the next suburb over. Single man, fifties, stabbed. Subjects at large. Much more interesting.

Crunch, crunch. Ah, his Coors. Eyes glued to his phone, he reached over expectantly but his hand met nothing but air.

Someone slid onto the bench next to him. He startled and looked up. It was a teenaged girl, with long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and skin so white it reflected the lights from the bar. Another one sat down across the booth. Brunette.

"Tyler Miskewitz?" asked the blonde. Her voice was soft, with a refined British accent that he recognized immediately. It sounded like it had come from an elite grammar school, but it was actually the product of a sixteen-year long electronic curriculum that he'd licensed at exorbitant cost. Anything for an edge in the market.

"No," he said, and resumed cutting his steak.

He felt a sharp jab in his rib. He looked down. She was poking a kitchen knife in his side.

"Drop the knife," she said.

He looked across the table at the brunette. She flashed him a gorgeous, heart-stopping smile. The type that can only come from a one-in-a-million genetic lottery win, or a wallet-draining selection from the 23andme catalog. He carefully placed his steak knife and fork on his plate, and pushed the plate away.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Mom," the blonde replied.

“You don’t have a mom.”

“Her name is Rose.”

Ah, fuck. “Let me guess,” he said. “Hayley and Elizabeth?”

The girls nodded.

“Who’s who?”

“Hayley,” said the brunette.

“Elizabeth,” said the blonde.

Goddamn it, Rose. What have you done?

“I don’t know where she is,” he said, scooting back along the bench to the diner wall. Where was that goddamn waitress with his Coors? “All employee data belongs to Unimaiden now.”

Elizabeth slid in closer, pushing the knife harder into his rib. “What a shame,” she said. “Guess you’re a dead end, then.”

Fuck this, she was insane. He hadn’t slaved his ass off for thirty years to become a ‘dead end.’ “Wait!” he said, trying to conceal his desperation. “I have a backup!”

“Where?” Hayley asked.

“At my apartment.”

“Let’s go, then.” Elizabeth let up the pressure on his rib and slipped out of the booth, keeping the kitchen knife pointed at his torso.

Tyler slid across the bench and pushed himself out of the booth. Hayley followed. He put his jacket on and the three of them exited out the fire door. He figured he’d return to settle his tab tomorrow.

The cool night air sharpened his senses. He looked down at Elizabeth, who was clutching his left arm tightly and was pressing the kitchen knife into his leather jacket. She was tiny. Couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred pounds. Could she even stab her way through his jacket? It’s not as if knife training had been part of her curriculum. Plus, what was he going to do when they arrived at his place and found out he’d been lying about the backup?

It ended here. In one quick, violent jerk, he twisted free from her grip and knocked her knife hand away. Roaring, he punched the malfunctioning teenager in her pristine, designer face. As she staggered back, he stepped forward and-

Shick.

Oh, fuck. His stomach.

He looked down and saw the handle of his steak knife, protruding from his gut. He looked up. Hayley was standing over him, eyes wide in shock.

Fuck, that was a lot of blood. The world started to spin. He stumbled, fell to his knees, and collapsed.

ISO goddamn 36363. Written in blood. Now he knew what the prick had meant.