

CONOR KELLEY

Bears

*As Kurt Vonnegut wrote: "All this happened, more or less."
This story is for Susanne and Bo.*

Did y'all need anything?" Kim asked, in her southern drawl, as she poked her big, fat head into our office.

The three of us looked up at her from our rolling chairs clustered in the center of the room. I tried to give her my most genuine smile. Kim, the office secretary, was a round, pink woman. I'd describe her as hefty. She had glasses and a couple chins. She wore lots of scarves and shawls. She looked like the Midwestern Housewife Potato Head.

"No, no, we're just fine," Bo said. "Thank you."

"Well awlright. Now Jackie's gone today, so y'all just let *me* know if you have any needs. Or questions. Okay?"

"Sounds good!" I said, too enthusiastically.

"Oh, bless your hearts," she said with something like a smile and walked out.

"Buh-bye," Susanne said after her.

The three of us looked at each other. Susanne quickly put a finger to her lips. She pointed at me and pointed to the open door. Then she pointed two fingers at her eyes and pointed those two fingers toward the hallway. I nodded and crept to the doorway. After taking a deep breath, I peeked my head out and looked up and down the hall. Clear.

"Ahhhh my God she's so creepy," I said to them as I sat down again in my chair.

"I wonder how much of that she heard..." Bo said.

"You know, that 'bless your hearts' thing..." Susanne said.

"...her and Jackie are like a two-headed monster..."

"...that 'bless your hearts' thing is, like, the southern way of saying 'fuck you.'"

"Really?!" Bo and I asked.

"Yeah!"

"Remember that party we had to celebrate her twenty years with the company?" Bo said. "I almost felt bad for her, twenty years and no promotion. Every couple years, watching a new idiot like Jackie become her boss. I almost felt bad for her; I almost did!"

"Yeah," I said loudly, getting excited now. "She gave me a creepy look last Thursday, and I almost shit my pants!"

Susanne and Bo looked at me silently. Susanne shook her head. Bo chuckled.

"Okay, so what were you guys gonna tell me?" I asked.

"Let's start here, Casey—how much do you know?" Bo asked.

I waved my hands in front of my face and made a motorboating sound. "I know nothing. Zero things. I'm a blank slate."

"And that's how we like you," Bo said with a laugh.

"K, so you know how Jackie's gone today?" Susanne said. "It's because her husband..." she looked around and leaned forward, "*her husband is dead.*"

"No," I said quietly.

"Oh yes," Bo said.

"*He was found dead this morning,*" Susanne whispered.

I was silent for a few seconds. They studied my expression.

"How?"

"*Poisoned.*"

"No."

"Ohhhh yes," Bo said.

"So," Susanne started, "I'm not sure how much you know about Jackie...how much do you know about Jackie? Right, blank slate. Okay, so Jackie and her husband have been separated for a while. They just started the divorce process. Now, you know how crazy Jackie is around the office."

Jackie, our boss in the proofreading division of our textbook company, was an honest-to-god sociopath. She felt threatened by everybody in the office, so she tried to take credit for other people's work and turn people against each other. She used to bring baked goods in for everybody, but kept them in her office so she could corner one of us in a weakened state of hunger. What exactly would have happened in there is a mystery, but nobody tried.

Jackie dressed her three kids up in costumes for a month be-

fore and after Halloween. We pitied her kids. They were mostly silent and looked at their shoes a lot. Her oldest, Damien, looked just like her husband. We all felt bad for Damien. He was a sweet kid, too.

“So, apparently Jackie hasn’t been letting her husband see the kids since he moved out. I feel so bad for those kids. Especially the one that looks like him. God, the one that looks like him!”

Susanne tipped her coffee cup all the way back, then took it away from her lips and shook it.

“Wanna go down to the café?” she asked me. “I’ll buy you a coffee.”

As we walked down the stairs to the café, I couldn’t speak. The month I had been interning there, I thought I had a crazy boss. Like, crazy with only a dash of dangerous.

For instance, the previous week Jackie had gone on a low-cut shirt craze. Now, Jackie was an attractive woman. She was tall with long legs, blondish/brownish hair, dirty blonde, if people say that. But you know the saying among guys: ‘You don’t stick your dick in crazy.’ I’m sure there’s a saying like that among women.

Anyway, one day she dressed like she was giving a seminar on the power of boobs. And she was just bending over for everything, trying to catch somebody looking—really inappropriate stuff. So, on a little whiteboard in our office we wrote “BEARS.” ‘Bears’ was our code word for boobs, because you can’t write BOOBS on a whiteboard in your office, and because direct eye contact with either boobs or bears is dangerous.

That afternoon, we were all working, heads down, door open, when a voice behind me asked me about the whiteboard.

“Well, bears...” I swiveled in my chair and started to say, and found myself staring directly into Jackie’s cleavage. Couldn’t have been six inches away.

“BEARS!” Bo yelled when he saw.

“Bears?” Jackie asked me with a cruel smile.

“Yeah,” I said to Jackie’s shoes as I felt my face get hot. “Bears. Are. Aggressive? And...rrr...ruthless animals who, ah...quickly... move in for the kill, which is. Something. We...strive to be? But with spelling mistakes.”

I looked up at Jackie’s face. She seemed pleased.

“Is that so?” she asked.

“It’s like a motivational thing,” I said.

“Hmm,” she said. “I think I like bears.”

Jackie turned and walked out.

Bo put his head in his hands.

“*She’s got the fucking place bugged,*” Susanne whispered.

Now, I don’t know what you call that. Not sexual harassment, but something.

But this was more serious than anything else she had done. This was murder. It usually doesn’t get more serious than murder.

“Remember our code word BEARS?” Susanne asked as we reached the counter. To the barista: “Two coffees, medium, black, room for creamer.”

“Yeah, actually I was just thinking about that.”

“You were just thinking about boobs, huh?”

“I was thinking about the whole situation, not just boobs, thank you very much.”

“Okay, so remember how well you executed that secret BEARS mission?”

“...I mean, I was thinking about boobs a little bit.”

“Focus. Okay, this situation needs, like, three times the effort you showed with the BEARS mission. Four times more. Because there’s more...thank you, no, no, keep the change, thanks...because there’s more to this situation.”

We took our conversation to the creamer station, and as I poured skim milk and hazelnut creamer, I asked, “How much more?”

“We’re talkin’ motives here.”

I looked around. “You mean, beyond custody?”

“Those supervisor evaluation forms we trashed her on? *Her* bosses set up a meeting with her about them. Looks like she’s gonna get canned. But if she’s bereaved...”

“Sympathy.”

“Exactly.”

We were almost to the top of the stairs by now.

“None of this gets talked about in the office, though. Too much risk. Especially with Kim lurking around. Kim’s just as dangerous as Jackie. Plus, she’s been here for about a century. She knows all the secrets around here.”

“Yeah, what’s her deal today?” I asked.

“Um, she’s the devil, Casey. Try to keep up.”

We all got an email later that day saying Jackie would be gone the rest of the week. We looked at each other wide eyed, then put away our work and began a discussion of grunge music that took us right up to closing time. Susanne was in love with Eddie Vedder.

The next day, we took a two-hour lunch at a little sandwich shop down the street and discussed all the possible outcomes. The most obvious one was that Jackie would be convicted, sent

away, her children put up for adoption. We agreed that would be in everybody's best interest. We talked about plea bargains, witnesses, all sorts of things we had seen cops discuss on TV shows.

The three of us finished our food pretty quickly. It was a good place, down on Main Street...what's the name, ah, they might be closed now. Anyway, so we're sitting there with balled-up napkins and wax paper in front of us. Bo slurped the ice at the bottom of his Styrofoam cup and solemnly said:

"What if she gets away with it?"

Susanne and I looked at each other, then at Bo.

"Bo, come on," I said. "She'll get caught. She's got all the motive in the world, and she's a nut. The cops will see all that."

"That's not enough, though. What if she planned it outright or didn't leave a shred of evidence? I bet she had Kim help her, like some twisted little assistant, like her fat little Igor. Now think about how crazy Jackie is already. Now picture that same psychopath with the added confidence of GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER."

He said it with a little smirk on his face. It was all a little too unbelievable for us to take seriously.

Still, though, my sandwich wasn't settling well.

When we arrived back at the office, the lights were a little dimmed. It was quieter, like some people went home early. The reception desk was empty. I could hear Kim's voice, though.

Giving Susanne and Bo the five-finger stop sign, I followed the voice. It was coming from Jackie's office.

"Yes, of course I'll tell 'em, honey," she said. "What's that now? Your *fingerprints*?...uh huh....my word...An extended leave of absence?...Uh huh...uh huh?...well, he sounds like a good lawyer...of course, of course...God bless your little heart. Bye now."

As I heard the phone cradled, I crept a little closer and peered around the corner. There were cardboard boxes lined up just outside the office. I bent down to take a better look. Poking out of one of the boxes were sheets of paper and the nameplate from the office door:

MANAGER OF PROOFREADING DIVISION

JACKIE HENDERSON

I looked up and craned my head to read the frame on the opened door. The piece of paper, in neat handwriting, read:

INTERIM MANAGER OF PROOFREADING DIVISION

KIM LIND

And there in the office was Kim, reclined in Jackie's chair with her feet crossed on the desk, holding a folded newspaper open to the crossword puzzle with her fat fingers tapping a pencil

to her chin. She looked like she had moved in.

The next week, a professionally printed plaque replaced that paper.

A couple weeks later, I hugged Susanne and Bo, and they wished me good luck at my next job and told me to stay in touch, and they meant it.

On my way out, I stopped by Kim's office to say goodbye. Kim had baked chocolate chip cookies for my last day and made me take one as I left. When I walked out the door, I dropped the cookie in the garbage. I hoped the next city wouldn't be full of bears, too.