

The Office Buddy

Katie got out of her car and stared up at the old, brick building. Today was her first day at Dixson University College of Education. It was her first job since getting her degree last spring. The college was housed in an old renovated building that had been built when the University was founded in 1891. It was majestic and the large palatial building only added to the intimidation of starting a new job.

She walked into the front office and approached the receptionist.

“Hi, can I help you?” The woman smiled up at her.

“Yes, I’m Katie Hill and I was told to check in here. It’s my first day.”

“Oh!” The receptionist smiled, “Of course, you’re the new girl in advising. Let me give them a call and someone will come get you.”

The receptionist got on the phone as she motioned to a line of chairs for Katie to sit in. A couple seconds later, she hung up the phone.

“Janet will be right down to get you.” Katie smiled and took another deep breath.

“Cassie?” Katie looked up at the sound of a voice. Standing in front of her was a woman who appeared to be in her early 50’s and was dressed somewhere between a witch and 70’s era Stevie Nicks with wild wavy hair and a long lace skirt. She realized the woman was talking to her.

“Oh, um, it’s Katie.” She smiled and stood up to shake the woman’s hand.

The woman stood there with a puzzled look, ignoring Katie’s outstretched hand.

“Are you sure? I thought the new girl was Cassie.”

“Uh, yep, I’m sure.” Katie smiled. “It’s Katie.”

“Huh.” The woman frowned. “If you say so. I’m Janet. I sit at the main reception desk in advising. We’re going to be office buddies. Let’s go get you settled in and I’ll show you where to get some coffee.”

Katie smiled at the way the woman pronounced coffee, like cof-feh, as if she would be showing Katie a secret drug stash instead of the office coffee pot. Janet was quite the character and Katie figured she would keep things interesting.

Janet showed Katie to her desk and left while she put her things around her area. She sat out a couple personal things she had brought. She surveyed the large office. Two wooden desks and a copier were the only substantial furniture in the somewhat drab room. The carpet was a stained green and the walls were a very institutional tan. Katie decided she would definitely need more personal items to liven up the place.

Janet came back in the office about that time followed by a red haired woman that Katie recognized from her initial interview.

“Katie, this is Sharon. She is the Administrative Assistant for our department.”

Katie stood up to shake the woman’s hand. Her grip was loose and somewhat clammy, “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Sharon replied, “Are you getting adjusted? Just let me know if you need anything.”

“I was just about to show her around.” Janet said.

“Okay, well, I’ll let you two get to it.” Sharon smiled nervously and walked out of the office.

Janet turned to Katie, rolling her eyes.

“Just so you know, they’re trying to fire her.”

“They?”

“Some of the professors upstairs. She messed up some personnel files a while back; it was a huge mess.”

Katie had no real reply to this, so she simply nodded. She had only met Sharon a minute ago, so she didn’t really want to judge her.

The rest of the day was fairly calm. Katie learned more about everyone from Janet and learned more about her actual job. By the time five pm rolled around, she was wiped out.

“I can’t imagine what it will be like when I’m actually busy.” Katie told her mother on the phone later that night.

“Well, sometimes boredom makes you more tired than actually working.”

“Oh, trust me, I was not bored. My office buddy made sure of that. I can tell you more about the people in that office than I can you and dad.” Katie laughed.

“A real character?”

“Mom, I swear to you, she is a total trip! I was cracking up all day.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” Her mom said.

The next few weeks seemed to fly by. Katie was enjoying her new job and had taken to sharing “Office Buddy” stories with her friends, mostly on social media.

Oct. 1st- “NON-STOP!!! The woman has talked non-stop for 2 and 1/2 hours! I don't even think she cares that I'm only listening 25% of the time!! HAHA!”

Oct. 13th- “Oh! Office Buddy is ON A ROLL today!! 2 hours at work and she has already gone from talking about her “online men” to her having diarrhea this morning to worrying about her daughter being “the only white girl at camp”. Help me!!!”

Oct. 23rd- “Office Buddy wants a Volkswagon or "A Slug-Bug is what I think the kids call them these days." Yes, OB, 'these days'...if by 'these days' you mean 1977!! HAHA!!!”

Nov. 10th- “Good Morning Office Buddy Fans! Just for you-2 things that Office Buddy "invented" and "should have patented"- 1. "Peace, love and Happiness"-I THINK she means the peace sign, heart, and smiley picture. Yep, that was hers. 2. "Bar Code Tattoos" If you have one or want to get one, you have my Office Buddy to thank! Stay tuned for more ways that Office Buddy has enriched everyone's lives!!!”

She was careful to put her profile on private and not friend anyone from work. The more Katie shared, the more people enjoyed it. Friends were beginning to say she should start a blog or write a book. Katie just found it nice to vent.

A week before Thanksgiving, Katie arrived at the office and Janet was already at her desk drinking “cof-feh”.

“Morning.” Katie said.

“Morning,” Janet replied. “Well, look at you, all dressed up. You know, I tried to do my make-up like yours once, but I just looked like a big ole raccoon.”

Katie paused slightly at the comment. Was that a compliment or an insult? She just shook her head and smiled. Maybe she would have to ask her friends on Facebook later.

About that time, Sharon came in to use the copier.

“Good Morning, Katie.” Sharon smiled.

Katie smiled back and continued what she was doing. When Sharon left, Janet rolled her chair over to Katie’s desk.

“You know, she didn’t want to hire you.” Janet whispered.

Katie stopped and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there were two people up for your job-you and another gal. The other one was a friend of Sharon’s. But, I didn’t think that was right, so I said I liked you best. Basically, you owe me for getting you this job.” Janet laughed.

Katie just stared at Janet as she rolled back to her desk. She “owed” her? Was she joking? Surely, she didn’t mean that literally, but either way, what an odd thing to say. Katie just decided not to worry about it and go about her business.

Soon after, the University let out for Thanksgiving break. Katie enjoyed the calm, drama-free time off and her family enjoyed the many tales of her adventures with her co-worker.

As much as Katie enjoyed her job, she was sad to see her little holiday vacation end. As she walked into the building, Sharon, who appeared to have been crying and carrying a large cardboard box, met her.

“Sharon? Hey, are you okay? What’s going on?”

“I’m gone.” Sharon sniffled. “I’m fired.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Katie leaned over and gave Sharon a little hug, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Just be careful.” Sharon’s face turned dark.

“Of?”

“Janet. She makes the work environment caustic and unbearable. She has done it to me and a long line of people before me. She gets some sick thrill out of it. If she wants you gone, you’ll be gone.”

Sharon walked past a flabbergasted Katie and out the door. Janet mentioned that Sharon might be fired months ago and Janet was just a secretary. How could it be her fault Sharon was fired?

After Sharon left, Janet volunteered to help in the Administrator’s office. This gave Katie twice the work to do in their office, but it was quiet, so she tried not to complain. Unfortunately, as “go with the flow” as she was trying to be, things were really starting to back-up. Later that week, in the breakroom, Katie found Janet and Mary Jo, the receptionist from her first day, chatting and eating lunch.

“Hello.” Katie said as she reached into the refrigerator for her lunch.

“Hey, Katie!” Mary Jo smiled. “We were just talking about Sharon’s position. Word is you may be the favorite to take her place.”

Katie noticed that Janet was unusually quiet.

“What? No!” Katie had heard the rumors too, but didn’t want to get her hopes up. In the meantime, she was just trying to keep her head above water covering her job and Janet’s. She smiled and left the ladies to their lunch.

That afternoon, Janet marched into the office.

“Katie, you need to file these.” Katie looked up to see Janet walk in with two boxes of files on a cart.

“Janet, I can’t. I’ve got too much to do. Can’t you file them?”

“No, no, I’m much too busy. You’ll have to do it.”

“No, Janet. I’m busy too.” Katie said.

“Busy with what? Your whole job can be done by noon.”

Katie looked up from her desk, stunned by the harsh and false statement.

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“Well, that’s what the last lady who had your job said. Maybe you just don’t know what you’re doing. You girls come in here with your fancy degrees thinking you can do anything, but

you're no smarter than anyone else. I worked hard to get to where I am. I don't just slide by on a piece of paper."

Katie felt her face flush red with anger. She did not have the patience or the energy for this conversation.

"Janet, go away."

Janet looked startled. "What?"

"You heard me," Katie said. "Get out of my office."

"This isn't your office. This is the central office. It belongs to everyone."

Katie stood up from her desk. "I said get out!"

Janet glared at Katie, did one of her infamous eye rolls, and then turned to walk out. Katie sat back down and looked at her hands. She was trembling. She had never had someone push her buttons like that. She took a deep breath, fought back tears, and went back to her mounds of work.

Over the next few months, things remained the same. Janet had adopted the Administrative Assistant's job as her own and had appointed herself supervisor of everyone.

Katie was growing more and more stressed by the growing amounts of work and the toxic atmosphere. Janet continued her snide, backward comments about Katie's clothes and job. The breaking point came shortly after the Spring Break vacation.

Katie walked into her office to find a few of her drawers open on her desk and her printer open with missing ink cartridges. She had no question who had been there.

She walked down the hall to Janet's office.

"I would appreciate it if you would not ransack my office and take my ink." Katie turned and left as soon as she had said her peace.

Of course, she should have known Janet wouldn't leave it alone.

Directly behind Katie, Janet entered the main office.

"I had things to copy and I couldn't find any ink." Janet said.

"I'm not interested in why, you could have waited." Katie sat down at her desk. "You have no right to come into my area and dig through my desk and take my supplies. Especially when I'm not here."

Janet sighed and rolled her eyes. "You need to grow up!"

"Just leave my things alone, Janet."

Janet did not speak to her for a couple days after, but the Administrator did come in the office and ask Katie to special order ink for Janet's printer.

After that, things seemed to return to the way they had been before Sharon left. Janet was staying out of Katie's hair for the most part and Katie was getting her work caught up. Katie was looking forward to school letting out for the summer. She would still have to work, but the workload was much less for summer terms than for fall and spring.

One afternoon, a tall, blonde woman appeared at Katie's door.

“Katie? Hi, I am Hannah Grellner, HR director for the college of education. I was hoping we could speak for a moment.”

“Uh, sure.” Katie stood up and followed the woman to a close by conference room. She was a little concerned and surprised to see the Advising Office Administrator sitting at the table.

Katie sat slowly in a chair and shifted nervously as the HR director shut the conference room door.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “but may I ask what exactly this is about?”

“Katie,” Ms. Grellner began. “It has been brought to our attention that you have been having some issues.”

Katie frowned, “Issues?”

“Yes, it seems that you’ve been having a bit of trouble keeping up with your work recently.”

“Well, I’ve been covering two jobs.” Katie said.

“And what two jobs are those?”

“Mine and Janet’s. She has been working in the Admin office.”

“Well, Janet assured us when she volunteered to help in that position that she was also keeping her own tasks under control, so why would you be doing any of it?”

“I’m doing all of it!” Katie felt her voice begin to raise.

The Administrator and the director looked at each other. Katie knew they assumed she was lying.

“Well, it has also been mentioned that you have refused to do jobs you were asked to do and also refused to supply a co-worker with essential supplies.”

“This is insane.” Katie said. “The only time I refused anything was when Janet ordered me to do something and I’ve never refused supplies to anyone.”

“I see.” Ms. Grellner jotted down some notes. “And at any point have you bullied another co-worker?”

“What? No! I would never! Janet bullied me. She made comments about my make-up and said I didn’t know how to do my job.”

“So, what can you tell us about these, Ms. Hill?”

Ms. Grellner dropped a stack of papers on the table. Katie picked them up and looked at them. On the papers were copies of every Facebook post Katie had ever made about “Office Buddy”.

“No.” Katie shook her head and lay the papers back on the table. “I was just telling my friends about things she did, things she said. My account is private. How did you even get these?”

“That’s really not the point, Ms. Hill. We here at Dixson take cyber bullying very seriously.”

“Did Janet give you these? How did she get them? How did she even know?”

“Ms. Hill, honestly, where we attained the copies is not the point.” Ms. Grellner said.

“These are true stories, not rumors. I just posted about what really happened and I didn’t even mention a name.”

“Regardless of accuracy, the university policies are clear. Social media is not exempt and this sort of mocking slash bullying will not be tolerated. I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.”

Katie sat back in her chair and stared at the table. Sharon had warned her.

Katie returned to her office to find an empty box waiting for her on her desk. She packed her personal items. How could this have happened? It had all been for fun, for her friends and family. Did Janet get her hands on those posts? Who else could it have been? Now that her job was gone, did it even really matter?

As she walked through the lobby with her things, she heard a familiar voice.

“Loretta? Are you Loretta?”

“Oh, no. Actually, it’s Lorelei.”

“Lorelei? Are you sure? I thought the new girl was Loretta.”

“Yes, it’s Lorelei.”

“Huh, if you say so. I’m Janet. I’m the Administrative Assistant in advising. We’re going to be office buddies.”