

Lee

November 1, 1959, Louisville, KY

Composed but nervous, Lee Casper sat in front of Bill Broach, President of the Bradley Creighton Box Factory.

“Well, Mrs. Casper, this could be an excellent opportunity for you, if you know what I mean. When a potential hire meets our requirements and I have to say, well, looking good so far.” He stole a quick glance at her legs. “You see,” he glanced up at the ceiling as if truly inspired, “our team is special, and we are always improving it. And that is how we have grown to be the premier cardboard package supplier north of the Cumberland Gap. We have and are about to have several large national accounts. ‘If it goes in a box, we’re strong as an ox.’ We like to say.”

“That’s impressive. It seems like a very promising opportunity. And, after all you've explained, I would love a chance to join your staff.”

“Well, Lee, may I call you Lee?” Broach asked. “Feel free to call me Bill.”

“Certainly.”

“Howard Bysee, he’s sort of a division manager but called a CEO, and I guess, my boss, we run this place. We’re from the packaging sales world and we earned our stripes the hard way, through results. Now, Lee, one thing I am wondering, is why you did not finish college? Two years at Nazareth and another year at the University of Louisville, both only what, within three miles of here?”

“Well, first of all, I did finish at the Clark County Commercial College, the two year secretarial and office management school. After graduation, I started at Curtis-Wright Aircraft near Bowman Field during the war. Then I began taking one or two courses, here and there towards my bachelor’s. I got married, now I have two kids, and well never had enough time. I thought I’d be a teacher by now, my major was English, but my situation seemed to always be changing.” she said. “Someday, though—”

“Well, quite impressive indeed. English, huh? Didn’t we all master that in high school?” He smiled condescendingly then cupped his chin thoughtfully. “Can you type?”

“Of course,” she said. “I took your test, remember? But English majors study more than grammar, there’s poetry, literature, creative writing, speech and rhetoric, business writing also.”

“Ah yes, literature. Like what?” he snapped as if to catch her off guard.

“Contemporary, fiction, poetry, classics.”

“Like what?” he repeated.

“Well, classics, anything from Cicero to Shakespeare to Poe to Dickens to Twain to Alcott, and thousands of others.”

He continued to stare, then furrowed his brow as if he were a lead interrogator detecting an obvious flaw in a fishy story.

“More contemporary, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway, and McCullers.” Lee added. “Even though they’re still writing.”

“I like Hemingway and I read Grapes of Discontent.” Broach began.

“It’s Grapes of Wrath and Winter of Our Discontent.” Lee said, smiling.

Broach now took on an air of conciliation even concern. “Lee, all well and good, but I cannot think of a single, no offense, lady writer. Can you?”

“I mentioned two, but Charlotte & Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Willa Cather, Margaret Mitchell of *Gone with the Wind*, Virginia Wolfe. All great and many more.” Lee said.

“Oh yeah.” Broach smiled again, though now lamely. “Well, I’m sure you’ll improve with your typing, most all do. Besides, you’re a cutie, now, don’t take that the wrong way. And I do really like the other, well fluffy stuff, proves you’re a real go-getter and smart too, with a good memory. I cannot, please forgive me, figure out what your university major will do for you in a business setting, but so what? Lee, without any further-adieu you’re hired. Robbie, beautiful Robbie, has sort of appointed herself, the leader of the girls. She’ll get you going. Welcome, aboard.”

“Thanks so much, Bill.” Lee said. “I am so thrilled to join the team.”

Robbie was indeed the self-appointed leader. Well-adorned with a low cut forest green dress, and patent leather black heels, she was extraordinarily attractive in a primal way which, pretty much, exceeded suggestive. She seemed to Lee to be a more buxom version of Gina Lollobrigida. Robbie was most anxious to check out the new girl and establish herself. “You’ll get a lot of action here. Tough pace, few breaks. How many words a minute can you type?” she demanded.

“Oh, sixty to seventy.” Lee responded. “Maybe not the first day—”

Robbie winced, “Well, with practice you’ll, jeez, every girl here is over eighty. I can do one-hundred-thirty. That’s the best you’ll ever see, ever, in the whole United States,” she bent so her face was inches from Lee’s, “of AMERICA. You can call me Robbie, by the way.”

“All right, Robbie. Where will I work?”

“Over here, in the corner, where I can keep an eye on you, capiche? That’s Italian.”

“Yes, I understand. And yes, it does come from the Italian, capisci.” Lee said.

Robbie frowned obviously confused. “Well, if we had an Italian dictionary, I would show you, it is an official Italian word without doubt. But we don’t. You’ll have to rely on my expertise.”

“Yes, Robbie. I, ah, will certainly do that.” Lee said.

“Royal typewriters. No Smith’s, no Underwood’s. Just the best, made for speed.” she announced proudly. “We call ourselves the ‘flying fingers,’ perhaps for more than one reason,” she smirked.

“That’s impressive,” Lee said.

“Ok, three ways to get your work. One, is the chicken scratch from Broach or Palmer Method from Bysee. Bysee’s more refined but totally boring compared to Billy Broach. Two, is dictation directly from them. And three is the Dictaphone, which is not actually a bad word.” Robbie said, breaking into laughter.

“No. I knew that.” replied Lee, smiling.

“Okay, first assignment, this pile of chicken scratch. Do what you can, but can what you do. That means get it done! You have eight hours. Upon each completion, walk it over to me

for check over. Always place your initials at the bottom left under the signature block or blocks and the cc's. Okay?"

"Sure Robbie. Are the supplies—"

"Everything you need is in your desk drawers. Additional paper and carbon paper is behind that door. But always knock, sometimes Broach might be in there, ahh, giving one of the girls a pep talk, or something." Robbie said with a wink.

"Sounds--thanks for telling me." Lee said, frowning slightly.

Lee began her work. Typing diligently, but carefully. Each written document had a number, two through five scrawled on it as to how many carbon copies were required. Her prior training told her that erasures on the original were to be undetectable and extremely rare, and only when all other forms of resolution were not practical.

A radio sometimes droned lightly, sometimes blared, throughout the day. The walls were light gray and the desks were only a couple feet apart, save for Robbie's which was catty corner facing the rest of the workshop desks of which Lee's was closest to hers. All total there were eleven ladies working: nine typists, one accountant, one bookkeeper. Of the typists, Robbie also served as both Broach and Bysee's private, or semi-private secretary.

By noon, Lee had completed eight of the twelve documents in her in-box, turned them in to Robbie, who had glanced them over and whisked them in to the bosses' office for signature; then into a small room where the part time 'mailroom girl' typed envelopes, processed postage, and carted them to the post office, only two blocks away. Robbie had announced, that sometimes she herself ferried the mail, in case it was of extreme importance. Lee found out

early on that was a sort of an office joke, because all the women knew Robbie just wanted to get a little time away and that she never performed this task in inclement weather.

At home, Lee was realistic and practical about the job. “Well, I’m only a typist, but we need the money and I realize because I never finished my degree, teaching jobs are hard to find.”

Her husband, Bud, was dire. He had lost his job months ago with an insurance company for which he was an inspector of steam, gas and electric apparatus, for client business concerns. He hadn’t liked his boss, and being a former World War II naval officer, had a hard time taking orders from ‘dumbasses.’ Eventually, the boss handed him a pink slip and an extra week’s pay. “You’re too good for us,” he had said mockingly, “and for this dirty little world.”

Finding another job had been difficult at best. Bud Casper had taken stints as a cab driver, a short order cook, and a used car salesman until the place had been busted for being out of trust on many of their autos financed by the bank and others which simply did not exist. Times got tougher and in 1958, Bud suffered a nervous breakdown, which cost him weeks in a mental hospital, put the family in jaw dropping debt, and made job hunting nearly futile.

As he staggered to get back on his feet, Lee became the breadwinner. Hospital bills poured in and in no time the family was hugely in debt.

“I don’t want you working, damnit, Lee. It looks bad and you’re so damned tired at night you’re killing yourself.” Bud would blurt.

“Well, there’s no choice. And we can’t declare bankruptcy. In this day and age, it’s such a stigma, that you’ll never get a responsible job.”

“You got two kids to take care of.” he said angrily.

“And you too, but we’ll have to get by, just like we did in the depression when everyone in every family helped in some way. And then again, with the war. Bud, the average family takes home around six thousand dollars a year, without this job, we take home nothing. Besides, I haven’t given up on teaching someday. That is my dream, and I will not be talked out of it.” Lee said. “Our babysitters are good people, and they do extra things around the house. *We* have no choice.”

Work, with Robbie went from annoying to stifling. “Why, Lee, after six weeks have you not increased your speed? Teri, over there, just out of high school is faster than you.”

“I am just trying to be accurate, Robbie. I don’t want to start over. And sometimes, with dictation or even with written, I have to correct the grammar, or perhaps, reword something. That takes time.”

“What? Reword? You are rewriting an executive’s lines without permission? Could you be smarter than them? Broach and Bysee run this division. They don’t answer to typists.” Robbie nearly shouted and the other girls stopped their work.

“I am not rewriting their letters, I am making relevant grammatical and spelling changes. Like anyone, I am sure they are busy and sometimes, in their haste, they make mistakes.”

“Oh, I see,” she continued her rant, ignoring the explanation. “You are a better speller than Mr. Bysee, who has been making enormous decisions and really huge money for this

branch.” Robbie angrily picked up the phone, dialed and plopped down hard in her chair. “Rerword,” she uttered.

Later in the day Robbie again approached Lee. “Lee, I am afraid I am going to have to seriously approach the *Misters* about something which is causing me, well, us, concern. Your compensation. At \$1.75 per hour, you are making more than half the girls here and you are not as skilled as they are.”

“Robbie,” Lee said, “I have two children in grammar school, my husband is off-work from a nervous breakdown. I need that money. ‘The *Misters*’, gave me credit for my education—“

“Well, they did not know about your speed, did they?”

“Yes they did. And they were most encouraging.” Lee said. “I was told what my salary was going to be. There was no discussion, I actually need more, but this is what I have. And I am grateful.”

“Well, my point is this and I am sure *Misters* Broach and Bysee will agree, is why would you be making more than the other girls and why would you be that close to me in salary? Good one, huh?”

At home that night, Lee was terse, “I can’t really believe what is happening from a co-worker. I mean Roobie, who is not officially a supervisor, this self-appointed know-it-all, is likely going to hurt us,” she told Bud.

“Quit! Find another damn job! You don’t have to put up with that from some bitch! But first go in and talk to your boss,” he asserted.

“I really don’t want to quit. Other than her, it’s exactly what we need.”

“But she’s cutting your damn pay.”

“Well, if that happens, I don’t know. I hate to go to Broach, or Bysee, that could just make things worse.”

“Worse! How the hell could things get worse!”

“Bud, we need this income for now. We really need it. Likely as not I’d have taken the position at a lesser wage. I don’t know,” she said.

The argument escalated and Chad, twelve, and Roseann, eight, listened intently from another room and were terrified about the future.

A week later, Robbie again approached Lee. “Do you believe in fairness?” she asked.

“Of course,” Lee responded.

“Well, they’re talking lay-offs. Staff reductions. We’re not getting the new business that everyone expected. You’re not only the last hire, but you are still slower on the machines than most of the rest.”

“I don’t miss days. I get *all* my work done, even if I have to stay over, off the clock. I continue to find grammatical and misspellings from time to time in the drafts and I fix them. Do you? Does anyone else?” Lee said.

Robbie was angered. She walked away. Lee followed her.

“I will not let this stand, Robbie, I will talk to Mr. Broach and Bysee too. I believe in fairness, but this is not fair. You are not taking everything into consideration.”

Robbie simply raised her eyebrows and smiled condescendingly.

That afternoon, Mr. Broach came into the typing office and asked the ladies to stop their work for a moment.

“Ladies, I must tell you, sadly, that we are likely going to have to trim the staff in here by a couple of bodies, at least. In addition, we are going to freeze wages for an undisclosed time. For some reason, the big accounts we were expecting like Nabisco; Sun Oil, imagine boxes for thousands of cans; Mattel toy guns; 7-Up cartons, did not come through, as we expected, as we were so sure of, and I do not know why. You are valued here, and according to Robbie,” he extended his hand and placed it momentarily on her shoulder, “I have word that most of you are doing the job in fine fashion. There may be exceptions and this may be where we look to determine the lay-offs as well as concessions to seniority.”

Robbie looked over at Lee condescendingly then turned back to Broach. “I can definitely help you with that,” Lee heard her whisper.

The next day, around noon, Robbie told the girls she needed a long lunch to do some important errands. Just before twelve, Mr. Broach called Lee and asked if there was a letter to a window sill manufacturer on Robbie’s desk. “I cannot imagine her leaving before that letter was

on my desk, we left instructions that she was to type it personally. It is imperative that we send it out air-mail, special delivery, by one today. Your desk is closest, would you mind checking?"

Lee went over and found the letter. "I've got it, Bill, on the way in."

"Oh, thank God," he said.

Curiously, Lee read the letter as she walked to Broach's office. A look of astonishment overtook her countenance as she knocked, then entered. "Oh, Bill," she said, "Robbie must not be feeling herself today, this has several errors in it."

"Errors?" Broach tried to joke, "Like a shortstop throwing the ball over the first baseman's head?"

"No, like, typos, misspellings, grammaticals."

"Well, show me."

"For one, in the very first sentence, it says, 'we knew, we'd better answer quick.' The contraction is wrong, and the adverb should be 'quickly.' Lee said, running her finger along the sentence.

Mr. Broach frowned. "Yes, I might have missed those, I generally read fast. I took the Evelyn Wood thing, you know, read like a banshee."

Mr. Bysee, came in. "Still thinking about getting a quick eighteen in this afternoon? You might as well. Anything going on?"

"Well, yes. Lee is showing me a couple mistakes on the Fenetre Sill correspondence. They might have missed them, pretty easy to miss, I guess."

“No,” Lee said. “More than just two. And not easy to miss. You can’t have major proposals going out to potential clients full of erratic text. I mean, it just doesn’t represent us properly and how does that diminish our chances? Quite a bit, I’d think.”

Bysee, leaned in. Lee began circling mistake after mistake. She shook her head and muttered, “‘...we’ll be right here in the *state capital* for you always.’ Should be capitol, and unfortunately Frankfort is our capitol.”

“Oh no, no, don’t even tell me. This is shit, Bill. It’s like morons wrote it. Stuff cannot go out like this. You don’t suppose? You don’t think, there’s vital correspondence that has slipped through like this, do you?”

“Oh hell no, I don’t think--” started Broach.

“Well, you’re the one who was always supposed to read ’em.” Bysee said angrily.

“Robbie, double checked everything. I’m sure she still does.”

“The hell. The goddam hell. You hired Robbie, you said she was the best! You’ve been drooling over her ass, excuse me Lee, for the last two years. *Bill, damnit*, Robbie actually typed this one, her initials are down at the bottom. When you signed them, many times, I signed them too, figuring they were perfect.” He turned to Lee. “I want you, after you retype this letter, to go over several files of carbon copies this afternoon and mark them. See if any more are like this. One or two mistakes, maybe in twenty letters, but basically, everything should be clean. This *piece* here, is dirtier than toilet paper cascading through the sewer!”

Lee nodded.

“Bill, get the Nabisco file, the Schwinn, the Mattel, Gerber, the Kellogg’s file, all the ones we thought we had closed, but ended up with, with shit.” said Bysee.

“Do it in here, Lee, at my desk.” Bysee said gently patting her shoulder.

Lee began her work in earnest. By 4:30 P.M. without taking a lunch or even a bathroom break, she had retyped and sent out the crucial letter of the day. Then, marked up over ninety letters. Only a pile of twenty-two had no errors.

Upon Bysee’s and Broach’s return to the office, they stood astounded.

“I have picked out the fifteen most egregious,” she said quietly, “and unfortunately, three went to Nabisco, two to Mopar, two to Hostess Bakeries, two more to Bendix Brakes in South Bend, one to each Delco, Kellogg’s, Lifesavers Mints, Shinola, Kraft Foods and Charmin. All places Robbie told me on my first day, we really wanted.”

The two execs again hunched over Lee’s shoulder and leered at the smatterings of red marks on each page. Lee glanced at Bysee, he visibly appeared several shades whiter than he had been.

“My good God, these were written by second graders, not us” he fumed. “This is fantastical-stenched-horseshit, Broach, and you assured me, on those which required both our sigs that they were cleared by Robbie and you, goddamnit. ‘The *kauzway*, around Louisville.’ ‘We recieved you reply.’ ‘Our sister *orafice in Leksington.*’

Broach was clearly shaken. “Well, how many came from who?” he asked.

“I guess we fire the whole staff,” Bysee shouted.

“No,” Lee replied. “Roxanne, Fran, Kelly, Lisa and Heidi, had almost perfect work, they’re just not the lightning-fast typists Robbie promotes, I mean almost, demands. Many of the others can be taught and saved, if we convince them to slow down and work on their grammar. Eighty, even forty words a minute is so secondary to the quality of the communication itself.” Lee said, as if she were suddenly in charge. “We need a dictionary and a thesaurus on every desk. I know, Robbie has outlawed them as clutter, but there are instances of using the same word over and over and over again on the same page. Like, exceptional, deceptive, quantity, durable, non-productive, equitable, and market-expanding; again, over and over, those plainly are marks of poor writing. One letter had the word, ‘nonplussed’ in it three times.”

Broach’s face was contorted, “What the f—fudge, does that even mean?”

“Well, Bill,” Bysee said sarcastically, “now’s the perfect time to wonder about it. Had you read this garbage, we’d likely have another half a million dollars in business.” Bysee yelled.

“I did read them, mostly.” He shook his head and diverted, “Well, after the lay-offs, I guess we should take Lee’s suggestions.”

“Well no shit, Einstein. Who’s out the door?”

“Well let’s let Robbie come up---” began Broach.

“Wait a f-, a darn minute. You want *her* telling us who’s in and who’s out?” countered Bysee. “No! And, besides, before we start, I want Lee here to know that we are giving her a fifty percent raise and a promotion and that will make you the highest paid gal in the office. Of course, Lee, your responsibilities are changing totally in line with your expertise. Okay, bring Robbie in, then, the whole office.”

Robbie entered moments later, gleaming with confidence, and Broach at her arm. Bysee nodded at her and asked her to sit. “Roberta, I guess, sort of, I want to hear your opinion on the possible lay-offs. Corporate is saying cut the staff by four now, not two.”

“Well,” she looked sadly at Lee. “I know Roxanne for sure, and I guess we need to go last one in, first one out, as well as giving marginal competence a hard glimpse.”

“Oh what the hell! Marginal? Piss poor competence is certainly what we’re looking at.” He frowned at Robbie, until Lee thought he might explode, “And quality competence is not *what we’ve been getting!* Screw this idea, this charade, Bill, get everyone in here.”

Moments later to the full room Bysee said solemnly. “Ladies, I am going to do what I can to make what lay-offs we announce today, temporary. However, please do not hesitate to look for other employment. Nothing is certain, not in life and certainly not here. I’m not sure Bill and I will even be here in three months. Now I need to make an announcement. Since we do not have an officially designated office manager,” Robbie suddenly beamed. “I am promoting Lee to that position.”

Robbie’s jaw fell. “What the fucking hell?”

Bysee gazed the room, everyone seemed surprised, many faces reflected relief, even joy. He continued, “Lee will from this point forward, check every piece of correspondence for error. She will edit, as appropriate, and return the piece for your retyping. We have sent out absolute written trash for the past months and it is no wonder that we have lost accounts and have struck out on all of the large ones which we were so badly counting on and desperately needed.” He took a deep breath, “Any questions?”

The group sat silently. Bysee, continued. “As far as responsibility for this shameful past few months, I have to put it on management’s shoulders. Mine, in particular. We should have carefully checked over the letters. Instead of a speed test, we should have given an English test. I am going to have Lee help us construct one. And, if we can implement it, we will have her help you with grammar, if you need it.”

Bill Broach then spoke. “Tomorrow, we will meet with each of you one by one and, ahh—“

“Provide more details,” Bysee interjected. “That’s it for now.”

“I’d like to say something,” Robbie said.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Bysee answered. “Save it for the private meeting tomorrow.” He nodded, “Good afternoon, ladies.”

Back at their desks, Robbie was hot. “What the hell did you tell them, Lee? Are you some kind of backstabbing bitch?”

“I pointed out there were some discrepancies on your letter to Mars Candies and I volunteered to retype it. Then, the thing exploded and they had me go over nearly a hundred letters. That’s all. If you saw something that clearly would put the company in a poor light, wouldn’t you do the same thing?” Lee asked.

Clearly, Robbie did not have an answer, she turned and flounced to the Coke machine.

The following morning at nine, a meeting was called and a reorganization unfolded. The typists were divided into three groups, each headed by a captain, which might vary from month to month, and all of whom reported to Lee. Two ladies were laid off, Robbie was strictly informed that she was solely a typist and was to work with Lee directly. She, dressed to the nines, announced she was quitting and stomped out. Bill Broach gazed at her with great sadness, and obvious lust.

August 1, 1961, Bradley-Creighton Packaging, Louisville, Kentucky

Lee had asked to meet with Mr. Broach and Mr. Bysee earlier that morning. They sat warily in Bysee's office.

"Morning Lee," Broach said, "I hope we're not in trouble."

"No, not at all. But, with mixed emotions, I want to give my two weeks' notice. I've got my dream job, I'm going to teach fourth grade at St. Thomas More. It's everything I have worked and prayed for since I was a child. I have always wanted to teach grammar school." Lee said, with a gleam in her eyes.

The executives' faces dropped.

"Jesus Christ, Lee, that's what you've been doing here!" yelled Bysee. "You are, in so many ways running this business. You are our voice, we can't have you leave us."

"You'll be fine. Everything has changed for the better since, well, the reckoning. We've picked up several accounts."

“Yeah, because of you, being totally in charge of the communications when it got promising to critical.” said Bysee.

“You’ll get through it and in flying colors. I have every belief in the girls out there, and you two, look how much more aware and focused—“

“Lee, teachers don’t make that much, I can give you another twenty percent raise,” objected Bysee.

“This has been my dream. I’m down to just two classes from my degree. Plus, thank God, Bud has found a very decent job running the operational & mechanical systems in a hospital. He was a chief engineer on ships in World War II, an officer, and started commanding his first engine room at twenty. Things are looking better.”

“Ahhhh, shit, Lee.” Bysee said. “Not looking better for us.”

“Thomas More, wasn’t that the guy who got his head cut off for mouthing off to the king?’ Broach asked.

“Shut-up, Bill. This is the worst day of our life. And you’re showing your stupidity about Medieval royal murderers.”

“That’s where they got doubting Thomas, I think, doubting the king,” replied Broach.

“No,” Lee corrected, “That was Thomas the Apostle, who lived about thirteen hundred years before.”

“I cannot believe, you’re leaving us Lee,” Roxanne said, as Lee packed up a box.

“Yes, I’m going to do what I always dreamed of, but I will miss you all.”

“Poor us. You really made working here a joy, we felt good about this place and, well, ourselves.” said Roxanne.

“It will be okay. I promise.” Lee said. “I’m so proud of all of you.”

“I don’t know, if Broach gets in charge.”

“Well, that won’t happen,” Lee said.

“Don’t be so sure, Tammy says Bysee needs to be put on suicide watch.”

They both laughed.

Broach and Bysee helped carry Lee’s boxes to the cab.

“Saddest day of my professional career,” Bysee said.

“Me too, but I got an idea,” Broach said hopefully. “I saw Robbie the other day, she has been taking an evening program at Bellarmine College. By God, I think she’s ready to come back. I really do.”

“I didn’t know they had a brain transplant program at Bellarmine.” Bysee shot back.

“What the hell, boss, it could be a damn decent idea. I mean just as a typist or, *hey, receptionist!*” Broach said.

“You need to judge our staff on their brains not their bodies. And as far as a great idea, I got an even better one. Why don’t you get your ass down to St. Thomas More and see if you can register for Lee’s fourth grade class.”

