

Corporate Culture

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

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It was a case of "unauthorized schtupping" which was what it said, in more professional terms, on the papers when Jeremy's wife of just three years sued him for divorce. As for the more common description, those were the words of the division's President, Howie Rackman, who thought he was funny, but wasn't. Only three years from retirement, Rackman's sensitivities and terminology were those of a very different time.

"Schtupping," from the Yiddish "schtupn" meaning to push (in) or press. Rackman, who wasn't Jewish, but who had secretly always wanted to be, thought it was funny to mock Jeremy's ethnicity, laughing out loud when he did, shaking his head from side to side as he marveled at the wit only he appreciated. (He also wanted to be Italian, but only if he could have the accent he was certain women found irresistible.) At least he was an equal opportunity jerk, having no qualms about offending anyone regardless of their origins or type – and women, women in particular whom he considered inferior, little more than interesting toys for the men in their lives and his company. "Somebody has to do all this clerical shit," he often remarked around the conference table after one of the young female assistants who worked with senior management would leave to get coffee, make copies or do "God know what." It was no accident that they were all young and attractive. That was, after all, the primary reason they were hired.

Jeremy Levitz, the senior Assistant Manager in the division, just three years out of Wharton with his MBA, never fit in and couldn't get the promotions his work deserved. The market was soft, so he couldn't leave. What he wanted was to manage one of the new offices they were opening – get the hell out of corporate, spend the next three years building that office his way and then move back to headquarters after Rackman retired.

Jeremy was good enough for management to take credit for his work, but not good enough to be one of them. Their nominal excuse was his lack of experience. The real reason was that they didn't want the competition and couldn't overwork and otherwise exploit one of their own, and that meant denying Jeremy membership in their exclusive club of over-paid, under-performing senior division executives.

And then there was Ruth. 30. Unquestionably the hottest "shiksa" in the office. (Rackman liked to use these terms like they were his own. "Ever wonder to yourself," Jeremy once asked his wife, "where politically incorrect expressions go to die? Now you know.") As close to being "one of the boys" as a woman could be, she'd earned every dollar she'd made putting up with their crap, never letting them get to her, keeping her distance – never once having had so much as dinner with one of them. Rackman and his posse didn't respect her, not really, so much as they feared having to deal with her. She made them nervous for the wrong and inappropriate reasons.

She and Jeremy were the ones who made the division happen. Everyone in their division knew it. More to the point, so did corporate management two floors up. They tolerated Rackman as a

legacy, for his work with the founder building the company decades ago, but would clean house as soon he left. In the meantime, although neither Ruth nor Jeremy knew it, the two of them were bullet proof. Picking on them, dumping on them was as far as corporate would allow Rackman to go, although being fired might have been a godsend. For the two of them, the next three years under his supervision would seem like ten.

“I need the re-analysis of our southeastern region on my desk Monday morning.” Rackman’s tone was matter-of-fact, barely breaking his stride on his way past Jeremy’s office. Leaving early for the weekend, he wouldn’t be missed. “I’ll need 10 binders, and write me a presentation, big type, you know how I like it, including notes indicating when I point to what. That always impresses them. ...Use Ruth for whatever you need,” he added, raising his eyebrows as if those instructions had sexual implications. (Ruth had wondered out loud to Jeremy once, after a particularly slimy exchange with Rackman, whether or not he had a clue how truly unattractive he was? It was a rhetorical observation.) “See you,” and he was off without bothering to ask if there might be any questions, utter a “Thanks” or wait for Jeremy to nod his acceptance. Just a “Whoa. Hold the elevator,” in which everyone was begging the doors to shut more quickly, and he was gone.

“Asshole,” Jeremy mumbled under his breath, rolling his chair to look out at the cityscape and ponder his frustration. He’d been hoping to spend some quality time with Evelyn this weekend, but clearly that wasn’t going to happen. He’d be lucky to get out of his office. Maybe, he thought to himself, eyeing a young women moving wistfully through her office in the building across the street, maybe Evelyn would bring over some carryout that evening and they could get to know the leather on his couch together. Just then, the woman across the street stopped, and turned to face him. Smiling, she waved and let him lip read the word, “Hey.” He smiled and waived back at her the way they often did, both of them slightly embarrassed by their long-distance relationship as she walked away and out of her office. Seeing her like that, the girl with short blond hair he’d never met, was often the highlight of his day.

Turning back to his desk, Jeremy reached for his phone, thinking he’d better call Evelyn, just before it “buzzzz”d at him. Pressing the intercom button, he said the usual, “This is Jeremy. What do you need?”

“Hey. It’s Irene,” the receptionist on that floor. “There’s a messenger here with some papers he says he has to give to you, personally. Can you come out, or should I walk him back.”

“Thanks. Here I come.”

It was to the right, just down the open hallway formed by the offices along the perimeter and waist-height carrels in the middle of the floor. Turning the corner past the upholstered furniture in the small lobby, instead of the usual bicycle messenger smelling like he had just been on fire, there was a young man, in his early twenties wearing a suit. Hearing someone coming, he was quick to break off his vain attempt to score points with Irene. It wasn’t that she was so pretty, as it was the effect of her strawberry blonde hair that seemed to have a life of its own.

“Mr. Stein? Jeremy Stein?”

“Yes?”

“This is for you,” he said, taking a 9 x 12 white envelope out of the zippered portfolio he’d been holding against his chest. “And, if you would,” he paused for a moment, looking down to fill in the time on his clipboard form, “Please sign here, in the blank next to your name.” Jeremy scribbled his usual “JStein,” no period after the “J,” looking apprehensively at the return address for one of their city’s boutique law firms, well known for representing women in divorce, workplace and other litigation. “Thank you, Mr. Stein.”

“Yeh,” Jeremy mumbled, putting off opening the envelope until he was back in his office, knowing that Irene would be staring after him wanting to ask what was going on, but being nice enough to understand that it was none of her business.

It was a Friday afternoon, after a long week during which Jeremy had been noticeably upset by some rough calls with his wife, Evelyn, his end of the arguments having been overheard through his office walls even though he’d been trying to keep it down. Apparently she’d had it with the endless late night sessions at the office working with Ruth, often going until 1 or 2 AM, not to mention the weekends.

He was surprised, having been more or less oblivious to his marriage during the past year, but then he wasn’t. They were divorce papers alright, accusing him of adultery, naming Ruth Smythe the subject of his indiscretions. Ruth would deny the accusations vehemently, but no one would believe her – not even her friends among the other women in the office who had seen the two of them working together, heard the occasional laughter, seen them touch or brush up against each other when no one was supposed to be looking. It might have appeared innocent enough at the time, but now it made perfectly good sense.

By Monday afternoon, everyone knew. At first, and to everyone’s surprise, management wasn’t annoyed at their intra-office affair. Far from it, they were impressed that Jeremy had nailed, repeatedly, the hottest girl in the office – and *at* the office, no less. For Rackman and his yes-men, it was enough to make them tear-up. “Way to go, Jeremy. Good work.” They didn’t say it out loud, but you could read it on their faces and in the way they had started treating Jeremy. Make him one the boys, his sexual conquests rub off on them. The fact was, they still didn’t like him. All this new found comradery was more about minimizing Ruth. Respecting Jeremy had nothing to do with it.

And so they were feeling pretty good about themselves, living vicariously through Jeremy, until Ruth showed up with her attorney – a striking, if severe looking woman – who sat down in Rackman’s office, door shut, and explained, in no uncertain terms, how her client was going to sue his company’s ass off for sexual harassment and discrimination. Proof? What proof did she have? Sexual harassment and discrimination are always so hard to prove.

Ruth’s attorney wasn’t about to concede any ground. “Mr. Rackman, you don’t honestly think a jury is going to believe anything you have to say? You don’t have a single woman in any management position, not here or in any of your offices. With a couple of exceptions in the mail room, the entire clerical staff is female, young and attractive. No one over 40, no one overweight – and every one of them underpaid according to agency and government industry surveys.”

“This is extortion. This sex stuff was between Levitz and your client. Strictly personal business. What’s the company got to do with it?”

“You’re not really paying attention, are you Mr. Rackman? In the past 4 years, different men on your management team – including you – have asked my client out to dinner – a dinner “date” mind you, with no business purpose – on seven documented occasions, all of which invitations she declined. During the same period, she’s received nothing more than routine, minimal increases in salary, despite very substantial expansion of her responsibilities and three “Superior Performance Memoranda” for work which came to the attention of senior corporate management...”

You’d think Rackman wouldn’t have talked to them without his own counsel in the room, but that would have included corporate in the conversation. Turns out a significant portion of his retirement income is subject to Board approval. The kind of mess Ruth’s attorney was threatening wouldn’t be good for him.

“...And now, when she’s required to work *under* an Assistant Manager with less experience than she has, but who she has to please and, by inference, please you to keep her job, this happens!” The attorney held up her copy of the divorce papers. “Use Ruth for whatever you want? Are you kidding? That’s the way you talk about a female professional, raised eyebrows and a condescending smirk on your face, in earshot of the staff she supervises? Do you really want to take us on?”

“What do want?”

“Surprisingly little. You’ve got two new regional offices opening up in Savannah and Phoenix for which you’re advertising for managers. Levitz gets Savannah. My client wants Phoenix. Three year, no cut contracts, with standard executive level benefits, increases and bonuses. Promotions effective the first of next month.”

Rackman was quiet, doing his best to avoid the stare of the women sitting on the other side of his desk. And then he looked up, leaning back in his chair. “What the fuck. Your client can have Phoenix. Too damn hot, if you ask me, but why do you care what happens to Levitz?”

“My client feels that he’s basically an okay guy, who shouldn’t lose his job over something that’s really your fault. His marriage is over. It’ll be enough to have him reassigned to a startup office. You’ll just have to learn to live without the two of them.”

No reaction. (Unbelievably, Rackman was too busy staring at the attorney’s legs, her skirt a full three inches above her knee.)

“Besides, what do you care? Just agree and all this goes away.”

“You’re right,” he said, getting back to the issue at hand, “I don’t care. Consider it done.”

“We’ll expect both contracts in my inbox by COB Friday. My e-mail address is on my card. “

His pursed lips and inability to look them in the face were the only response they were going to get. Picking up the card the lawyer had given him when they first came into his office, he tapped the edge of it on his desk and waited for the sound of them pushing back their chairs to get up and leave.

Two weeks later...

“Hey, Ruth!” Jeremy realized it was her before he answered, calling from her new Phoenix area code cell phone number. “Are you having as much fun as I am?”

“More! How’s Evelyn? Are you settled in yet?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. What’s not to like. The city’s great. We virtually live on the ocean, and her parents and sister are less than an hour away.”

“Not to mention the money!!” He could have almost heard her laughing without the cell phones. “Absolutely the best idea Evelyn ever had!”

“Hi, honey. It’s Ruth.” Evelyn, holding the carryout they ordered, had just poked her head, to be funny, around the corner of the open door to his office. Jeremy would be working late tonight and they thought they’d unwrap his new chairs and leather couch together.”

“Here,” she reached for his phone, “give it to me.” “Hey, Ruthie! Thanks for your help with all this.”

“Are you kidding? I just wish I’d thought of it – or had a cousin who’s a women’s rights attorney.”

“Consider it a team effort. Rackman’s been screwing you and Jeremy all this time. The least we could do is return the favor.”

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