

Office Politics

by Katie Norton

The summer of 1974, between high school and college, I got my first real job, paid corporate employment. My mother couldn't stand having me underfoot, sitting around all day, watching TV. She drove me in the family station wagon to a temporary secretarial agency. I told the lady at the agency I was 18, even though I was only 17. She gave me typing, spelling and grammar tests then told me to report to a company in Sunnyvale called Vapor-Phase. I'd be working as a clerk-typist.

Vapor-Phase was located in a charmless early-70s Silicon Valley office park. Silicon Valley's technology companies are the engines that drive the world economy. The "magic" that is Silicon Valley began, and continues to this day, in the most hideously ugly suburban office parks built on the mudflats at the south end of San Francisco Bay.

I entered the lobby, where Elizabeth, the glamorous receptionist, answered the phone and greeted lobby callers as if welcoming guests to her home. Being a receptionist seemed to me to be very chic, like being a spokesmodel for the company. I wished I were a receptionist instead of a clerk-typist. Clerk-typist didn't sound glamorous at all.

The lady at the agency told me to ask for Bob Goodson. When Bob appeared in the lobby, I had to stifle a wince. His face was a network of old scars, stitched together like Frankenstein's monster. It was hard not to flinch and look away. The first thing he did was gasp and say, "My God, Candace, you look exactly like my first wife." He liked me immediately. I didn't have to do a thing to win him over. He was sold. He was hyperactive, kinetic, moving, talking, gesturing, with a cigarette, because everyone smoked back then, even at work. Especially at work.

I followed Bob down the hall to the purchasing department, where I would spend the next three months. He addressed the facial scars right away.

“I was a prisoner of war during World War II, in Japan. I was held in an underground coal mine as a slave laborer. We were tortured and starved by the Japs. I'm lucky to have lived through it. It was hell,” he stated matter-of-factly. The evidence was on his face.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” I said, shocked. I hadn't realized that the Japanese had kept American POWs and forced them to work in coal mines. My dad and my uncle had been in World War II. My uncle lived in Minnesota and I rarely saw him. My father had been a Seabee in the Navy, stationed at Alameda Naval Air Station. When he talked about being stationed in Alameda, he only mentioned good things, such as learning to fly and how much he enjoyed coming down to Stanford to watch the baseball games, which were free of charge to military personnel. I'd never asked him any questions about the war. Now here was a person I'd just met five minutes ago, telling me that he'd been held captive in an underground coal mine, tortured and starved.

Bob cheerfully switched subjects. He was a glass-half full sort, not one to let past troubles keep him down. The Purchasing Department was large room with three desks. Bob had the largest desk. His second-in-command, Julie, sat at a smaller desk, which was piled high with papers and files and surrounded with boxes and filing cabinets. My desk was just a small table with a chair. Bob introduced me to Julie, a frumpy, blond, JC Penney clad, married woman in her 40's, with unfashionable glasses. She said hello and then faded into the woodwork under Bob's constant stream of chatter.

Bob was wildly enthusiastic about having me there. He kept going on about how lovely I was. “Julie, Candace looks just like my first wife,” Bob said. Julie glanced at me and said, “Hm,” or “Oh,” something non-committal. It wasn't an appropriate thing for him to keep harping on. I was happy to have Julie there, a duenna. Otherwise it might have been uncomfortable to have Bob constantly flattering me.

Bob explained that he was the Purchasing Agent for the company, responsible for buying everything necessary to manufacture the product and run the company. At the time, I didn't know much about

corporate structure. I now realize that Purchasing Agent is a mid-level job. Bob would never become CEO, CFO or any of the C-titles, nor would he be considered for a VP slot. But in front of 17-year old me, he made his position sound very important.

Vapor-Phase made a product called "Vapor Deposition Reactors," which were boxes in which silicon chips were manufactured. A big-ticket item, sold to other electronics companies, not to the general public. Now such things would only be manufactured in China. I have no interest in anything technical, and had a hard time paying attention when the product was discussed. It didn't matter. I realized right away that my job wouldn't necessitate it.

Bob asked me to sit down at my desk. He proceeded to tell me more about himself. I just sat there and listened politely. The only thing I felt I could do in the face of his unending stream, was to occasionally ask him a polite question to show that I was paying attention. I modeled my behavior on the ladies I'd seen on the Merv Griffin Show: Angie Dickinson, Suzanne Pleshette, Jacqueline Bisset. They sat and bantered with Merv and laughed at his jokes. Merv loved them. I tried to act charming like that with Bob.

This only spurred him on. Julie sat behind mountains of paperwork, occasionally adding a comment, but mainly just doing the work. My other job, besides listening to Bob, was to deliver documents to other company executives, either bringing to them something they had to sign that I would take back to Bob, or delivering documents to them that Bob had signed. I got to wander around the company daily. This didn't take up much time, and I was free to lollygag, which I took full advantage of.

On my document delivery runs, I usually stopped by Elizabeth's reception desk. She would tell me about dinner parties she and her husband gave, waving a manicured hand and a well-draped sleeve for emphasis. I enjoyed hearing about her detailed menu plans and the guests at her fancy parties. I was a long way from being able to throw together a dinner party. Maybe if I stood next to her and talked to her every day for a while, I could absorb some of her charm and social grace by osmosis.

Bob told me that in the 1950s, he worked in Hollywood as an electrician at the movie studios. "The movie stars are the most depraved people you could ever imagine," he began. "Marilyn Monroe used to walk around stark naked and drunk in front of the entire crew. She knew a lot of men were watching her. She used to smile and wave at us. I'm not kidding," he said, in response to the unbelieving look on my face. "Liz Taylor, she's foul-mouthed pervert," he went on, "and a drunk. Took all day to get her ready to shoot a scene."

"Rock Hudson—queer as a three-dollar bill," Bob proclaimed. At the time I couldn't quite wrap my mind around his Hollywood stories. This was several years before Rock Hudson came out publicly while dying of AIDS. My mother and grandmother loved watching Rock Hudson on TV in *McMillan and Wife*.

I couldn't tell if Bob was making his stories up. Coming on the heels of his Japanese coal mining story, I wasn't sure. He was one of those people who talk non-stop.

Bob told me that during his second marriage he was living in Montana. "My wife and I would go into town to do our shopping. We noticed that the women up there were big heifers. Huge. You never saw so many fat ladies as there were in Montana. But there were no clothing stores catering to fat women. So we decided to start up a store with fashionable, stylish clothes specifically for larger women. Well, one thing led to another and it went bust. We had to declare bankruptcy. And now look. You go to the mall and there's fat ladies' clothing stores everywhere you turn. We were ahead of our time, I tell you! We had to start our lives over completely from scratch" But Bob didn't stay down for long.

After the failed clothing store, he went to work for FMC, a giant defense contractor. That's where he learned the art of corporate purchasing. It is an art. "You can't just buy anything the vendors try and push on you, Candy. You have to get the right parts at low prices in order to get a good deal for the company," said Bob. For someone like Bob, who liked to talk and haggle, it was perfect. The art of closing the deal, he had it down. He was a schmoozer, speaking in

plummy tones as he negotiated during long phone calls with the vendors.

Bob constantly talked of his desire, his craving, his need, to own a helicopter. "I can't believe how long it takes me to drive from Milpitas to Sunnyvale every morning. It's hell on earth I tell you, being stuck in that commuter traffic. I need a helicopter. I have a plane over at the Reid-Hillview Airport. But that won't do me any good for this commuter traffic. If I had a helicopter, I could get here in about 10 minutes." He took the daily gridlocked commuter traffic as a personal insult. Julie and I spent many a day listening to him agonizing over how he could get his hands on a helicopter and a permit to land one in the Vapor-Phase parking lot.

Bob loved to go out to lunch. He often took Julie and me with him. One of his regular places was The Bold Knight. It was a legendary early-day Silicon Valley restaurant. It was wanna-be upscale and they had a maitre d' at the door. Bob really liked to make a grand entrance, which was prolonged while he made sure he got a good table. Basically The Bold Knight was a glorified Denny's. Back then people didn't know how to eat properly. I recall iceberg lettuce and macaroni salad. I was always happy to go out to lunch with him. When the boss takes you to lunch, you know you won't have to pay, and if it takes longer than an hour, it's officially "work."

Bob's hands-down favorite place to have lunch was the Sunnyvale Elk's Club. It had old-fashioned sassy waitresses he could banter with. He liked to order a Brandy Alexander, which he considered the height of sophistication. That cracked me up. It's such a wussy drink. Brandy, crème de cocoa and half & half. Before lunch! With plenty of cigarettes. Ugh....Back then everyone smoked before, during and after the meal. Even the waitresses smoked discreetly at their stations. Bob greatly enjoyed teaching me the proper way to concoct a Brandy Alexander. We walked over to the bartender to watch as Bob intoned, "First you shake the Brandy and crème de cocoa with ice in a cocktail shaker, and strain it into a pony glass. Then you turn a spoon upside down over the glass and slowly pour

the cream over the spoon so that it floats over the Brandy." I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

Those Hollywood actresses at the Academy Awards make a big deal of their acceptance speeches. As if acting is so difficult. It's not. Anyone who has a job and a boss puts in Oscar-winning performances every day, just out of pure self-preservation. But since Bob was buying and the Elk's Club waitresses didn't ask for my ID, I happily slurped down quite a few Brandy Alexanders with him that summer. Julie drank them too, although she usually had only one, to be a good sport, then switched to white wine. Of course, now, nobody drinks at lunch. Back then, everybody did.

One day during one of my document-signature deliveries to "Mahogany Row," as the faux-wood paneled executive suite was called, John Hansen, one of the Vice Presidents, asked me to step into his office and wait while he signed some papers I would take back to Julie, who was waiting for them. John closed the door and asked me to sit down. He was drinking hot cocoa from the vending machine, dreadful stuff. His breath was horrible, like an open sewer. I could smell it across the desk, at least four feet away. He was dressed in a navy suit, a blue shirt and a gray tie with a small fleur-de-lis pattern. A red-faced, beefy man. The office was decorated with pictures of his wife and children. He slumped in his chair with his head in his hands.

"Candace, did you know I recently came back here after spending two years in our Hong Kong office?" John said.

"Yes, Bob mentioned that," I wondered where he was going with this.

"While I was over there I had a Chinese mistress. She was beautiful and I miss her so much I can't tell you."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I struggled to find an appropriate thing to say.

"Her named is May-Lee. Let me show you some pictures of her," he said, reaching in a desk drawer. He pulled out pictures of a tiny, scantily clad Hong Kong girl, dancing on a bar. She was pretty, with long, dark hair. I looked from her picture to the pictures of his

homely wife on the wall. No contest. May-Lee was far more attractive. I imagined poor May-Lee having to suffer being groped by bad-breath John Hansen. God, if his breath was this bad from across the desk, how horrible would it be close up? Gag me! I guess those poor bar girls in Hong Kong had to make a living somehow. Meanwhile, here I was, drinking Brandy Alexanders on the company nickel and not having to put out at all. Some people just live right.

I made a few more appreciative noises about how lovely May-Lee was and how much he must miss her. I didn't fear for my safety in his closed office. Clearly John had yellow fever. I wasn't his type.

"What took you so long?" Julie asked when I returned from John Hansen's office, "I told you I needed these in a hurry. I'm trying to get them out in today's mail."

"Sorry, Julie, I had to wait for Mr. Hansen to get off the phone." I lied. Julie wasn't the type to understand a man pining for a lost love.

One hundred degree August day, I ran some errands at lunch and my car overheated. I couldn't get it started to get back to work. I walked back to the office and asked Bob if he could help me get my car started. He drove me to the parking lot of the shopping center in his blissfully air conditioned car. My Ford Pinto had vinyl seats and I was wearing a very short mini-skirt. He lifted the hood, took a look, closed the hood and told me to try and start the car.

I slid into the driver's seat and immediately screeched in pain and jumped out as fast as I could when the back of my thighs hit the boiling hot vinyl seat. My skirt must have flown up and my legs spread wide apart as I leaped out of the car. Bob burst out laughing. "I knew that was going to happen. Candy, I see you're not a natural blond! Ha, ha, ha!"

I was so embarrassed. Getting a glimpse of my pubic hair had made his day. He made that remark several more times that afternoon. I knew better than to get mad, it would egg him on. I just gritted my teeth and tried to change the subject. To add insult to injury Julie said, "Candace, make sure you put down on your timesheet that you took a long lunch break to take care of your car problems."

"She'll do no such thing," said Bob. "Candy shouldn't get her pay docked because of a little bad luck. It could happen to anybody."

Another Vapor-Phase employee I met was a young woman my age working at a summer job in the drafting department. Unlike me, she was a skilled employee, who produced work product. Amy Fujikawa would also be starting college that fall. We had a mutual interest in rock & roll music and we started hanging out after work. She was from a Japanese-American family who lived on a flower farm nearby. The area near our office had previously been a farming community of Japanese flower growers. During World War II, her grandparents and parents had been forced to move to an internment camp.

"Bob, how do you feel about Japanese people?" I asked him.

"I hate the guards at that coal mine I was in, but I don't hate Japanese people in general," he said.

"There's a girl working here, Amy Fujikawa, whose parents were in an internment camp in California during World War II," I said.

"Yeah, well they had it a lot easier than I did," he replied. He was always nice to Amy in the office.

One weekend I stopped by Amy's house and met her family briefly before we headed out to a rock concert in San Francisco.

The Fujikawa home was down a long gravel driveway set in the middle of a rainbow of flower fields. Suburban office parks forming the new Silicon Valley were creeping up all around it. It was a rural relic from the past that would be gone soon. The interior of the home was mostly wood, in the old Japanese style. Very spare and clean. I assumed that Amy's grandfather had probably built the house. Amy said her grandmother had been a mail order bride back in the old days. I couldn't imagine such a thing. Your parents receive a letter in the mail from a man in America. You are put onto a boat and shipped over here, not knowing the language. You are met at the dock by your "new husband," who is no doubt horny as hell and desirous of mountains of home cooking after being a bachelor in a strange land for many years. What an ordeal for a young girl. And here she was now, in her seventies, sitting placidly in her living room. I said a silent prayer of thanks that I'd been born a spoiled

California brat and not a mail order bride. Amy introduced me to her grandmother and to her mother and dad. We all exchanged polite nods and then Amy and I left for the concert.

As the summer drew to a close and my last day of work came, Bob insisted we all go for lunch one last time. "I'm going to miss you so much Candy, I don't know what I'll do without you," he said as we prepared to leave for the Elks Club. "You've been a breath of fresh air." Yada, yada, yada. I'd heard Bob's flattery before.

The normally quiet Julie exploded from behind her stack of papers. She jumped up from her desk. "She hasn't done one thing except sit there talking to you all summer. I've worked my fingers to the bone. She was supposed to be my assistant. I'm going crazy and the two of you just sit there talking all day. I'm fed up!" She looked at me, "No offense, it's not your fault."

"Now, Julie take it easy," Bob said, backing away slowly, like you would from a mad dog. Julie continued with her fit, which was just getting wound up. I sat quietly, neutral, not wanting to escalate the situation.

The summer replayed itself in my head, from the first moment Bob laid eyes on me in the reception area. I guess Julie had a point. I had spent most of the whole summer talking to Bob. My title was clerk-typist, but I'd done practically zero typing. In fact, my typing skills had probably regressed since I'd started this job. The realization dawned on me that Julie had probably been overloaded with work. Bob had put in a requisition to hire a temp, to help her with her work. The minute I showed up everything changed, and he spent the summer talking to me.

I looked at Julie but felt little sympathy. I thought to myself, nobody can make you be a doormat. You allow it to happen. Julie really should have said something much sooner, rather than keeping it bottled up until she exploded.

The woman from the temp agency said Bob had given me a stellar review. I'd never see Julie's personnel file, but I'm sure it didn't contain stellar reviews. Yet she worked ten times harder than I ever would. Why the difference? Bottom line: Nobody respects a doormat.

I had sensed the dynamic of the Purchasing Department the minute I walked in, but it was my first job. I didn't understand things like I do now. I'd been operating off pure instinct, and it had served me well. Julie's aura of professional victimhood had repelled me like mosquito spray. I'd never really warmed up to her like I had with most everyone else at Vapor-Phase.

On my first job I'd surfed the roiling waters of office politics and had come out floating smoothly on top, like cream on a Brandy Alexander.

