

Sunny's Gone
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Kevin bounded up the stairs from the first floor two at a time, a bundle of interoffice envelopes and blueprints under his arm, smiling at everyone he passed. He was fast.

It was exercise to him, nothing more, a means of staying sharp and focused. There was no greater end, nor did there need to be. He was a replacement part in an anonymous machine, and he did his job well. I have been in places like this before, he thought, done these thankless tasks, and I have moved on. This smile shows I know this. This is temporary.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the window glass of a darkened office: white polo shirt, black slacks, neatly combed hair. He'd probably lost a few pounds in the last two months, from the twice-a-day mail runs. It's not so bad here, at least for a while. It's going to be fine.

He pushed open the door to the Rebuild Department and almost knocked Sunny to the floor. She had lately taken to standing in front of her receptionist's desk rather than sitting behind it. She squinted at a document she held within inches of her face, and seemed oblivious to their near-collision. Another document dangled limply in her left hand.

Kevin guided her aside with his free hand, and shifted his smile from face to voice: "Careful, Sunny, I nearly ran into you!"

Sunny gave a little start at his touch, but patted him on the back as he passed. "You go too fast," she said (fast pronounced "past," in a Filipino accent Kevin caught himself adopting in stray moments). "Why do you hurry so much?"

Kevin dropped the new mail and blueprints on Sunny's desk, glanced towards Irene's office door (which was closed), and walked back to her. "So I can finish the work before I have to start thinking about it," he whispered. Sunny laughed.

The stack of papers in her inbox was at least as tall as yesterday, probably taller. Sunny continued to stand and squint at the contract. He asked, "Is there something wrong with the magnifier?"

"No, it's working," she said. "But I can't do this with the machine. Every time I switch from one contract to the other, I get lost."

Kevin looked at Sunny's enormous computer monitor, and saw pencil shavings the size of boulders atop the gray expanse of the magnifier bed. She was right, of course: even if the magnifier let her see the words on the handwritten contract clearly, once she switched to proofreading the typed contract she would immediately lose her place. Even finding the same line of text would be a guessing game.

"Do you want to take a break, sort some mail for a while?"

"No," she said, "I should finish this. Thanks anyway." She turned away from him, and Kevin saw the rivulets of sweat trickling down the back of her neck. Over the last few weeks Sunny Montano had developed an aura of dampness about her, which seemed to grow with each day: her short hair hung in moist curls that matted to her forehead; her breath escaped in hot, impatient bursts or long misty sighs; her lenses were so thick that they appeared perpetually steamed.

"Did you call in the new plane reservations?"

She sighed. "No. I hate making those arrangements. Everyone always flying everywhere, two or three times a week. Why can't people just settle down?" Kevin shook his head; calling the travel agent was the one task that didn't rely on her vision, and now she hated that too.

Behind him, the door opened. Irene DiBenedetto, Vice President of Rebuilds for Bob Kingsley Construction, manifested in the reception area as a flurry of black cloth and blacker curls. Her eyes were ringed with black, her feet clad in Birkenstocks over black hose, and though she smiled her body was crooked with tension. "Good morning, Kevin," she smiled, then looked at Sunny. "Hi, Sunny."

"Good morning." Sunny's gaze never shifted from her contract.

"So, Kevin, I've got some projects for you today that we should discuss," she said, nodding in the direction of her door. "Sunny... Sunny, what are you doing?"

"My work, Irene." Sunny continued to stand in front of the door, eyes to lenses to paper.

The air seemed to get much louder. Irene glared at her. "Yeah, that's great," she said finally, "but how about at your desk?" There was no question implied in her tone, whatever the wording. "And sort some mail while you're at it." Kevin saw Sunny watching him as he closed the door to Irene's office behind them.

“Jesus, can you believe that bitch?” Irene crossed immediately to the low windows in the far corner and lit a cigarette. “What the hell is she going to do, take a fucking ballet leap over her desk every time the phone rings?” Crouched in the corner of her office, she pursed her lips and exhaled out the open window. “That I’d like to see, actually.”

“How’s it going?” Kevin asked, and braced for the response.

“I just got off the phone with the attorney. She has to spend another week here before we can even think about firing her.” She looked up at Kevin. “If he gives me the same line next week I’ll fucking destroy him, my hand to God. Did you go down to Human Resources yet?”

“Just got back. I gave them the copies of Sunny’s work from yesterday afternoon.”

“And filled out the paperwork?”

Kevin nodded. “Yeah, that too. They say I’ll get my first check on Friday.”

Irene smiled, and some of the tension seemed to lift from her body. “Welcome to the team, kid,” she said slyly.

Kevin nodded again in response, unwilling to dwell on her words. “So next week, they’re saying?”

She took another drag. “Today, they’re saying next week. Tomorrow... who fucking knows?”

Irene pushed unruly curls from her face as she blew smoke through the window. What must have happened, Kevin thought, was that some foul-mouthed longshoreman died down at the docks, and his ghost found this aging bohemian to possess. She was so not San Francisco, at least not the way he’d envisioned it before he arrived, and yet there was something reassuring about her. She gazed towards the bay, and asked, “So what is she working on, anyway?”

“The contract for the Crisp ‘N’ Juicy retrofit in Des Moines.

Irene shook her head bemusedly. “You sent that contract out last week, right?”

“Friday morning,” Kevin said. “So what’s going to happen when she finishes it and tries to call in the foreman’s plane reservation? I already booked that flight on Monday, so either she’s going to buy him an extra seat or she’ll figure out that something’s up.”

“Let me worry about that,” Irene said. “At this rate, I doubt she’ll finish the contract before the retrofit’s over.” She dropped her cigarette out the window and stood, shoulders sagging. “I spoke to the

president of the company last night. He told me our department couldn't afford to make any more mistakes this month. We've got to keep Sunny away from anything important."

"That could be tricky," Kevin said. "Brianna's coming in again today, and she's been pretty nosy lately. If we don't let Sunny do her job..."

"Then Brianna tells the Department of Rehab, and we get sued," Irene said in a tired voice. "And if we let her do the work and she fucks up, then I hear about it from the president of the company." She slumped into her chair. "Kevin, you're an employee of Kingsley Construction now. I put in a good word for you with Bob Kingsley last night, but you have to make sure..."

She stopped. "Wait. Who knows you're an employee?"

The question caught Kevin off guard. "I don't know. The folks in HR, you, me... Who's supposed to know?"

Irene looked stricken. "I don't know. I told Kingsley last night, I just told the attorney..." Her face went white. "Sunny doesn't know, does she?"

Kevin began to feel distinctly unnerved. "I don't think so. Should she?"

"No!" Irene jumped out of her chair. "If she tells Brianna, and the state finds out, we're screwed! They'll know we don't have enough work for two receptionists, and they'll say we never gave her a chance to learn the job! Sunny can't know."

"What if she hears something and asks me about it?"

"If she asks, tell her I said she should talk to me. Your job is none of her business."

Kevin looked at Irene askance. "Irene, my job *is* her job."

"Not for long," Irene said, and opened her door. She clasped her hand to her mouth.

Brianna Gabriel loomed in the open doorway, notebook in hand. She smiled sweetly, and was very tall. "Good morning, Irene! It's," checking her watch, "9:47 a.m. on Thursday, September the Third, and I'm here to continue with Sunny's workplace assessment."

Irene quickly found her composure. "Hi, Brianna," she said. "You could have knocked. Have you been standing there long?"

“Not long, no,” she cooed. “Irene, I was wondering whether I could borrow Kevin for a while later this morning. He’s very, very good with spreadsheets, and Sunny’s been having some problems with hers recently.”

Kevin looked to Irene. Weeks before, when she arrived after Irene first tried to have Sunny fired, Brianna had asked Kevin to train Sunny to better use her computer; Kevin had replied that his temp contract was with Kingsley Construction, and that they were paying him as a receptionist, not a tutor. She had nodded, noted the time and made an entry in her notebook.

Irene looked at Brianna skeptically. “Sunny told us that the Department of Rehabilitation trained her in spreadsheets before she applied for the job.” She paused, and the two women seemed to size each other up.

“But obviously,” Irene continued, “we want to help her as much as we can.” She turned to Kevin. “I’ve already given Kevin a lot to do for today, but I’m sure he could squeeze in a few minutes of training before lunch.”

Brianna’s round, full face grinned at him beneath a strawberry blonde pixie cut. “I don’t want to hold you up, Kevin,” she said. “Sunny and I will stop by your desk at 11:30 a.m. Thank you so much for your help.”

Standing at the copier, Kevin could faintly hear Brianna trying to teach Sunny the vagaries of using a mouse: “You move it with your hand and click here. No, Sunny, here. No, Sunny, here. No, right here. Do you see where I’m pointing?”

“I guess. I don’t know.” Sunny sounded tired, and it wasn’t even 11:00.

It had been this way for weeks now. Every day, Kevin would photocopy the morning mail, give Sunny the originals, then take the copies back to his own desk and do her work while she suffered through another day of training. Every day they worked on the same projects, only one of them aware of it. Kevin’s work was distributed to staff, Sunny’s was photocopied and held in reserve as evidence in the event of a lawsuit. He had found himself in the employ of a conspiracy.

The work was trivial, irrelevant: dates, addresses, names and numbers. Kevin had worked dozens of temp jobs like this before, and had learned to lose himself in minutiae, to use them as a kind of self-hypnosis: he could forget his troubles, how little money he was making, how he hadn’t met anyone

new since the move, and sublime into the data. It made him a good temp. Focus on the details and everything will be fine.

Sunny couldn't even find the details, let alone focus on them. Kingsley knew she was legally blind when they offered her the job, and had bought all the necessary equipment, but it now seemed that her vision masked an even larger problem. Brianna came in to help her three times a week: sent by the state, she called herself an observer, and her honeyed demeanor masked the rigor of a detective. Sunny and Brianna spent days covering the same ground without progress, the banality of the actual work growing more absurd and horrible with each repetition until the work itself became invisible, obscured by struggle and frustration. Sunny herself seemed to have entered into a fog, and was less visible each day. It grew hard to watch.

Brianna and Sunny arrived at Kevin's desk at exactly 11:30 a.m. "Sunny and I have been working on spreadsheets for a while now," Brianna told him, "but I think it might help her to get another perspective. Isn't that right, Sunny?"

"Sure," Sunny mumbled. Standing beside Brianna, eyes cast downward, she could have been a myopic schoolgirl being escorted to the principal's office. Her forehead shone with perspiration.

"I have to go make a few phone calls, Sunny, but I'll be back in half an hour. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah." Sunny pulled up a chair and plopped down forcefully. "Don't hurry back." Kevin stifled a chuckle. After Brianna left, Sunny kicked playfully at Kevin's leg and mimicked her beatific grin.

After a few minutes of talking about spreadsheets, Sunny had obviously stopped paying attention. When it first became clear that Sunny's problems extended beyond her vision, Irene asked Kevin to stay for a few weeks to provide support; at the time, Sunny had seemed grateful for the help, though she was incapable of remembering his instructions for more than a few minutes. Now she fiddled with pen caps and straightened paperclips while Kevin spoke. "Nobody finds this stuff interesting, Sunny," he said, hoping to strike a chord.

"You do," she said, spinning in her chair. "That's why Irene asks you to do everything."

Kevin turned to his monitor. "No, I think it's pretty boring too. I just focus on the details and try to get through it as fast as possible."

"You do a good job," she said, and moved her chair closer. A list of retrofits sat on the desk, and Sunny pushed it towards him. "Why don't you do this?"

He looked at the list: Brianna had left it on his desk, to be completed by Sunny with his help. He smiled, and gave her a gentle jab with his elbow. "I don't think that's what Brianna meant by training."

"I mean it. I need your help." Kevin looked at her, then looked back at the list: he had finished this task only an hour before. In two seconds, he could have the completed file open on his computer.

"Come on, Sunny. Let's just work on it together." He pushed the keyboard towards to her.

Sunny said nothing, made no motion, but fixed him with her magnified eyes. "I need this job, Kevin," she said. "The big lady keeps trying to teach me, but... I can't do it. I can't figure anything out anymore. I know you can do it for me."

Kevin felt himself start to turn red, and hoped Sunny couldn't see. Did Brianna put her up to this? Does she know it's already finished? "That's not why I'm here," he said, unsure whether he was lying or not.

"Yes it is!" She rose from her chair. "You're a temp, and I work here! You're supposed to do what I tell you!"

Was she serious? Kevin weighed his options in his mind. "Sunny, even if I did do this for you, they're not going to let you stay if you can't do it yourself."

"Do it or you're fired!" she said in a high, shrill voice. "That's an order!"

Kevin glowered at her. He didn't know whether to laugh or to lay into her. He already felt guilty about deceiving her, but now he wanted to tell her the truth just to see it sting. Sunny's hands were trembling fists. "I think you'd better take this up with Irene," he said with as little emotion as possible, and turned back to his monitor.

After a time, he heard a snuffle behind him. "I'm sorry, Kevin," she said at length. "Don't be angry with me."

He had already started entering new data, and refused to turn. "I can't help you anymore, Sunny," he said. Eventually he heard her shuffle back to her desk.

Kevin was off his game during the afternoon mail run: he had to backtrack when he realized he'd forgotten to bring the blueprints with him; when he greeted the receptionists in other departments, his

smile felt plastered on at an awkward angle. The halls of Kingsley Construction were tall and wide but somehow still claustrophobic, a combination of flat gray paint and a single small window at either end. Passing by the grated door of the freight elevator, he felt as though he were walking the span of a cavernous toppled silo.

He carried with him the new mail for Rebuilds: two job applications for a project manager position. Kevin thought of his résumé making its way to similar offices, delivered by temps waiting impatiently while in some building across town their own résumés were being delivered: a shifting network of applicants handling applications, waiting for word.

He didn't care about the company. He didn't care about the work. There wasn't much left to care about. What would happen to Sunny if she lost her job? He hadn't asked, nobody had. No one felt they could afford to. There were larger forces at work here; if the machine collapsed, then so be it, but he would not be the breaking point.

When he got back to Rebuilds, Brianna was working at Sunny's computer. Sunny sat next to her, her head hung in defeat. All of her resentment expended, it seemed that she was now barely there. Kevin said nothing as he passed them, but heard Irene emerge from her office as he walked back to the copier.

"Brianna, what the hell are you doing?"

"Sunny's having a hard day, Irene. I'm just helping her with her spreadsheets."

"I'm sick of hearing about those goddamn spreadsheets, Brianna!" Irene's voice carried clearly over the drone of the copier. "They should have been finished this morning! If you can't train Sunny, and Kevin can't train her, then what the hell is she doing here? We're certainly not paying her to mope around."

Kevin glanced around the corner to the reception desk: Irene was standing over Sunny awaiting a response, but Sunny did not look up.

He distributed copies of his latest work to the Rebuilds staff, and was greeted with the familiar array of relieved thanks and bemused grins. Most people tried to avoid Sunny as much as possible, though a few would still bring her menial tasks out of sympathy. More than once, Irene had chewed them out for their kindness.

When he returned to his desk, he found a piece of paper on his chair and picked it up: it was the spreadsheet that Sunny had asked him to complete for her. In spite of his annoyance with her, he smiled, shocked and amazed that she had been able to finish it so quickly. It looked identical to the version he had done this morning.

He looked it over a second time, and then sat down. This wasn't Sunny's work.

"I found that sitting in the copier, Kevin." From over his shoulder, a sweet voice spoke. "Is it yours?"

He swiveled to face Brianna. Sunny asked me to work on this file this morning, he imagined himself saying. But then what was it doing in the copier? He tried to navigate the layers of deception, and found himself mute.

"It was sweet of you to help Sunny this morning," Brianna said, as if responding to his internal dialogue. "But I was wondering why you didn't mention your temp agency. They haven't started paying you to be a tutor, have they?"

"No," Kevin said. As always, Brianna was smiling: Kevin tried to read the mood beneath, and felt sure she was doing the same to him.

"Are you still a temp, Kevin?"

Kevin's pulse echoed in his head. "I think you'd better take this up with Irene," he said, for the second time today.

Brianna's expression never wavered. She looked at her watch. "3:38 p.m. on Thursday, September the Third," she said, and made an entry in her notebook. "Thank you, Kevin."

Kevin sat shaken at his desk till 5:00, then ventured into the reception area. Irene's door was shut, and Brianna and Sunny were nowhere to be seen. He slipped out of the door to Rebuilds as quietly as possible and headed for the bus stop, wondering whether he'd have a job tomorrow.

After three months in this town, he still couldn't remember to bring a jacket with him every day. The sun was still visible, but the western hills were obscured in fog that extended eastward in long tendrils. He shivered in his polo shirt. As he rounded the corner to the bus stop, it seemed as though the fog had chosen this one avenue as an express line to the bay: a huge column seemed to barrel down on

him, enveloping all but the block directly before him. At the end of that block, Sunny stood, waiting for the bus.

He walked forward, unsure whether to approach her. The fog continued its progress. When he arrived at the bus stop, he was in the thick of it, and thought for a moment that she couldn't see him.

"It's so cold here," she said, "but I always forget to dress warm."

"They probably don't have fog like this in the Philippines, do they?"

"No. But I haven't been back there for years. I moved here from L.A." She chuckled. "They don't have fog like this there either."

"When did you move to the States?"

Sunny stared across the street, though nothing was visible on the other side. "Ten years ago," she said. "When my eyes started to go bad, I came to see a specialist. UCLA. I never went back home."

He lost her for a moment in the fog, and then she was standing right in front of him, standing close, her eyes swimming behind her lenses. "I was the purchasing manager for the biggest construction company in Manila," she said, and her voice grew hoarse. "Only woman manager. Like Irene. Everything that happened, I knew about it. Every *detail*."

She looked back down the street, towards the west. "Everything is different now," she said quietly. "I don't know anymore." In the near distance, he heard the bus pull up.

The next day Kevin arrived at work 45 minutes late, and opened the door to Rebuilds to find a party in progress. The entire staff milled around the reception area, partaking from a bag of bagels and cartons of orange juice set on the desk. Sunny and Brianna were again nowhere to be found.

Amid a throng of project managers, Irene spotted him and shouted, "Hey, there's our receptionist!" A cheer arose, and Kevin was soon besieged by congratulations and slaps on the back.

He fought his way through the crowd to Irene, who grinned at him the whole way. "What happened?"

"She's gone!"

"When?"

“Last night! Everything went to shit after you left. First Brianna cornered me for two goddamn hours reading me federal disability code, which I might *still* be listening to if the foreman on the Long Island retrofit hadn’t called me to ask why nobody bought him a plane ticket to get there!”

Kevin racked his brain. “Jesus, Irene. I don’t even remember that project. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t understand,” she beamed. “You never knew about it! One of the project managers took it directly to Sunny! But with no foreman, they can’t start the retrofit till day after tomorrow! Bob Kingsley was so pissed when he heard, he called Brianna himself and told *her* to tell Sunny she was fired!”

Irene’s glee was uncontainable. “She never called in the reservation! The Department of Rehab can’t blame that on her eyesight, so they dropped the investigation! She’s gone, Kevin!” Then she hugged him, and Kevin was briefly lost in a cloud of black curls and what smelled like patchouli.

“We could never have done this without you,” she said. “I spoke to Bob Kingsley about you last night, and I think you’ve got a bright future at this company.” She looked over his shoulder at the wall clock. “Which is why you get off easy for being 45 minutes late, Mister Receptionist. Now go deliver the mail. I’ll save you a bagel.”

He took the stairs more slowly this morning, and allowed people to pass without a smile. The hallways were darker than usual: the city was fogged in, and only a faint blue-gray light entered through the windows at each end.

The machine had survived intact. Its progress had been slowed for a time, but the wheels continued to turn. The obstruction was gone, the drama of collapse ended before it began. His job would now be that much easier, without the guilt. And then he would find another job, would be trained for it by another temp, and all the details would be forgotten.

He opened the door to Human Resources office lost in thought, and nearly bumped into a tall man with suspenders and a pinstriped shirt. For a moment they stood in the doorway facing each other, until Kevin saw double: the man’s picture hung on the wall behind him. “Good morning, Mr. Kingsley,” Kevin said.

“Hi,” the company’s president said flatly.

“So I guess we resolved that problem up in Rebuilds,” Kevin continued, remembering to smile, and then waited.

Kingsley appraised him wordlessly. His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. About time. I’m late for a meeting.” He brushed past Kevin and strode down the dark hallway. As Kevin watched, the tall man glanced back towards him; Kevin thought he saw him scowl.

Kevin let the door close behind him, and dropped the mail onto the receptionist’s desk. “Thanks,” she said, then added, “Hey, does that little blind woman still work up there?”

Kevin’s shook his head. His vision was blurred. “No. Not anymore.”

“Oh. Are you taking over for her, or just temping?”

A bead of sweat ran down his back. He began to answer, and then stopped himself.