



BAGELS

E.D.E. BELL



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“Now, what’s this next one?” Mr. Knutsen inquired. “*Lactation* room? Is that—” Somewhere in the executive’s mind, an alarm triggered regarding legally sensitive subjects. He tapped the table. “Oh, yes, a mothers room. Whoever submitted this may not be aware that we already have one.”

Louise stared down at her pristine yellow binder. She had stayed late several evenings working on this proposal. “Mr. Knutsen, I authored this one myself. It’s a change from what we have and I’d like to present it.”

He reached for his coffee. “Not sure I understand. It doesn’t seem like something, with your level of experience, that would impact you.”

Experience was the preferred euphemism for *old*, as there was no law for experience discrimination. A pit formed in her chest. Within twenty seconds, he had turned to evaluate Louise rather than her proposal.

“No, I’m not pregnant,” she answered in level tones, “nor should we start rumors of my experience.” Mr. Knutsen’s face tightened and his deputy pursed her lips. Around the table, several people averted their eyes. “You don’t need

to require a thing in order to recommend it, of course. For example, you approved the smoking shelter though Mrs. Knutsen told everyone at the picnic that you had quit.”

Mr. Knutsen huffed, shaking his head at the comparison. “Of course that’s not for me. You can’t have people standing in the rain; it isn’t right. That’s just looking out for people. Now, back to this . . . mothers room, who’s complaining about it?”

I am not bringing her into this. Louise gestured toward Mr. Knutsen’s binder. “The current space is in the restroom; my proposal details an update that would provide a more welcoming environment for lactating employees.”

Mr. Knutsen forced a smile. “It’s not *in* the bathroom; it’s a separate area with a divider. I know of only one person affected, and she has been fairly accommodated, in full compliance with the law. We looked up the requirements.”

The planning lead nodded his head in agreement.

“Perhaps I could approve a sign,” Mr. Knutsen offered, “to place outside. That would show we have a family-friendly environment.”

Louise took a deep breath, reminding herself this wasn’t on her mind, either, until last month. After a lunchtime bowl of chili, she was hoping she could sneak away for “a couple of things,” as her husband referred to it. As she walked into the stall she heard an unusual sound, muffled, from behind an industrial-looking separator.

Zzzz. Zzzz. Zzzz. It took her a moment to place the sound. *Oh, a breast pump!*

She liked how times had changed; attitudes had been

so different when her own children were born. She winced, remembering the comments people had made about her returning to work at all, and the years she had smiled back despite the wounds inside. Surely they didn't need to use the restroom for pumping milk. *And I came in here to—* Louise left, her business unfinished.

She had hesitated to approach the young woman, but the situation nagged at her mind. It must have been Tanya from accounting. She had returned not long ago from maternity leave, a new picture of a tiny baby boy on her desk. "Let me know if you need anything," people had remarked, before returning to their email.

"Tanya?" Louise had inquired after ensuring they were alone. "If you don't mind me asking, does it bother you to have to use the restroom to pump?"

The look on Tanya's face showed her true feelings, but she appeared reticent to answer.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to pry," Louise responded, turning to leave.

"I hate it," the young woman whispered, turning Louise in mid-stride. "I can't relax with people *peeing* in the background. And there's no lock; I'm always scared someone's going to walk in."

"Have you said anything?"

Tanya shook her head. "I don't want to bring it up; I draw enough attention as it is. They're always staring at my bag in meetings, wondering if I'll have to leave. If I complained about the room, it would just remind them that I have no business being here anyway. That's what they think."

"You don't know that," Louise answered, doubting the words as she spoke them. "You could give them a chance. The fiscal year planning meeting is coming up. You could submit it."

"I'm not talking to them about my . . . *breasts*. I'll make it work."

Louise stifled a grin. "Tanya, despite your perceptions of the executive staff, I assure you they have all encountered breasts in their time. Even Mr. Knutsen."

Tanya chuckled. "Maybe."

For days, Tanya's situation continued to rankle Louise, until sitting at her keyboard with an evening cup of rooibos tea, she began to draw up the requirements: a comfortable chair, a desk, outlets, a fridge, a clock, a locking door, a bulletin board, and a sink—along with a concise justification for each. *There*, she had finally declared, as she punched holes into the side of the proposal.

She stared at the binder now, the extra copies in front of her. Louise opened her mouth to protest, but Mr. Knutsen had already moved on to approving construction of a new shelf in the snack area, strong enough to hold full toaster ovens rather than traditional vertical toasters.

"Thanks for everyone's input," Mr. Knutsen was saying. "All great improvements for our team. We've got another set to get through, but I need a bio-break first. Let's take ten."

The executives filed from the room as an administrative assistant bumped past with large bags of bagels. The planning lead was following behind. "Everything bagels are my

favorite,” he explained. Louise responded with a polite smile as she walked past the table and out into the hallway.

Louise stepped into the restroom and found herself staring at the dividing wall with resentment. The pit now weighed heavy inside her. It wasn’t that she had been dismissed; it certainly wasn’t the first time. It was the idea of young people afraid to raise their voices and no one coming to their aid.

She walked into the small space. It was bare except for an office chair, a small folding table, and a picture of Tanya’s boy pinned to the wall. A toilet flushed in the background. *They think they can put us away. That things will return to how they were.*

She didn’t want to wait for next year’s review; every year would be another woman made to feel dirty and unwelcome in her own place of work. She ran her hands across the table, and a terrible idea sprang to mind. *I wouldn’t. Would I?*

Louise stepped back into the hallway and nearly walked right into Mr. Knutsen emerging from the other side, tossing a paper towel into the can as the door swung closed behind him.

“Louise, don’t take it wrong. We can’t accommodate every niche need or there wouldn’t be resources to keep the lights on.” He reached toward her shoulder, stopping short as if held back by an invisible lawyer.

“I just worry, Sir, that younger parents won’t be drawn to work here. It would be a shame to lose some really talented people over a change that would be easy for us to make.”

Mr. Knutsen nodded. “Louise, I know you well enough

to know that you won't take this the wrong way, but what if they do leave? Aren't their families better off? Why would we stand in the way of mothers spending more time with their children?" His hand patted the air.

Years of painful memories hit Louise in the chest as Mr. Knutsen walked back into the room.

Louise made up her mind.

As she walked into the room, everyone was absorbed into their phones, including Mr. Knutsen. They ignored her completely as they finished their emails or made a quick call home, giving her time to slip from the room.

She sat back into her seat as Mr. Knutsen finally looked up from his phone. "Everyone, help yourself to some—" he started, staring at the table to the side, covered with a series of neatly arranged papers. "Where are the bagels?" He turned with a pointed finger to his deputy. "Didn't Tracy bring in the bagels, Melanie?" Melanie peered at the table in confusion.

Louise braced herself and raised a hand. "I needed room to set out my proposal so that everyone could review, since no one had the chance to read it earlier. I moved the bagels to the ladies room."

Mr. Knutsen's face burned red, and his deputy squinted. The planning lead glanced suspiciously at his everything bagel. To his left, a man's eyes opened wide, and another gaped to his right. The man across the table glanced away, making a face of disgust.

A quick flash of doubt filled Louise before being pushed away by resolve. *Too late now. If I just got myself fired, I'll go*

out fighting. “There’s no need for concern. I set them out behind the divider, so they aren’t technically in the ladies room. It’s very clean there.”

That afternoon, Louise watched for a chance to catch Tanya alone. “The planning meeting was today. A pumping room—it’s on the list.”

Tanya stepped back. “Wow, really?”

Her eyes clouded, a reaction Louise didn’t expect.

“I’m sorry; did I go too far? I didn’t think you’d—”

“No,” Tanya waved her hand. “No, please. I’m just surprised, is all. Nobody’s ever fought for me before. Not here, anyway.”

Louise clutched the binder. “This was only the first round. We still have to get it past the V.P.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just that you tried, well, it means so much to me. Thank you.”

“Hang in there. I’m not ready to give up.” Louise met Tanya’s eyes for a moment. “Everyone makes tough choices. Don’t let them get to you.”

“I’ll remember that.” With a final nod, Tanya hefted the bag’s thick strap onto her shoulder and headed toward the restroom.



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