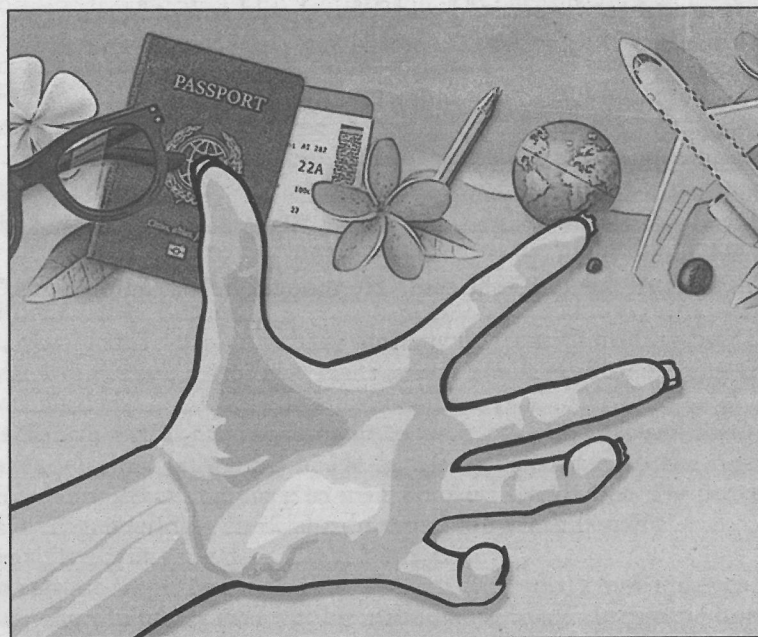


FIVE BULLET FRIDAY

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Lucy Bell was a planner. From the first day of kindergarten, she'd planned out her clothes in advance. Monday through Friday, her room was decked out in striped leggings, solid tops, and oversized bows. Many years later, she would credit the habit with the creation of Five Bullet Friday. Five Bullet Friday was a bulleted list she posted every Friday for her staff. She kept the lists short and sweet, like herself. (She was exactly five feet tall and one hundred and five pounds. The five pounds bothered her.) The lists always started with verbs and encouraged employees to *do* something. A nudge in the right direction for the following week kept the team positive and upbeat.

Except for Liz Wilson. Liz Wilson was the saddest woman on the planet. (She was nothing like Karen Newfield, who actually had something to be sad about.) A month ago, Lucy caught Liz burning one of the lists, *burning*.

By the time Lucy retrieved it from the trash, all that was left was a single line of curvy font, Lucida Handwriting. (It was the font closest to her own name.) Lucy didn't actually see her burn it, but she knew. Liz was standing over the garbage with a smirk on her face. Liz, the frumpy girl whose closest encounter with laughter was a throat clear. Lucy didn't acknowledge the sabotage. She simply printed another list.

Lucy waved at the florist as she unlocked the front door of Travel World. Barry was rinsing the sidewalk. The hose shook from the tremor in his hands. Poor dear lost his wife of forty years on their trip to the Dominican Republic. They said she died of a heart attack, but Barry said it was poisoning—bad rum. Who could say for certain? They had few regulations on alcohol. Plus it was a cheap vacation destination and therefore incredibly popular. Lucy had booked two tours this week alone.

"Good morning, Barry." Lucy pointed to a newly planted pot. "Lovely flowers."

"Violets. They were Betty's favorite."

"Aw. How sweet." She opened the door. "Have a good day."

"Ma'am."

She tacked Five Bullet Friday to the bulletin board near the palm tree, liking the way the numbers lined up in a row. She'd printed the list on flowered paper, pink roses with a gingham border. It was spring, and that meant flowers—and coordinating stationery. Then she planted herself in her cubicle, the largest since she was the owner, and got to work.

Her three teenage sons stared back at her from a wooden frame that read **FAMILY**. She wiped a smudge off the glass and turned on her computer. She and her ex-husband shared custody, and he'd already taken them for the summer. It was best that way. Summer was her busy season, and she wanted her boys to know what determination and hard work looked like. (They certainly wouldn't learn it from their father.) She'd started from nothing, and now look where she was: a downtown storefront with four employees. It took more than guts: It took time, and she was willing to put in the hours. It was only eight o'clock, and she'd run three miles, drank sixteen ounces of water, and made the list. It was going to be a productive day.

That was the last thought she had before the first bullet entered her chest.

#1 Dream Big

When Liz was young, she wanted to be an actress. Or her parents wanted her to be an actress. She couldn't remember which came first, but she was named after Elizabeth Taylor. That much she knew for certain. Which is why she went by Liz. Her name was a cruel reminder of what could have been, and she hated it. Her parents fueled the dream, like good parents, by paying for voice and dance lessons. When she majored in theater in college, they didn't bat an eye. They, like her, thought she would star on Broadway someday. No matter they lived in Indiana. If people believed in their dreams, they went places. Faraway places.

The place it took Liz was Los Angeles. The poverty, the crime, the traffic—the traffic—chipped away at her dream on a daily basis. But she kept at it for three years, out of loyalty or in spite of it. She fell in love with a B-list costar, a guy from Illinois who understood the dilemma, and when he dumped her for a starlet with better connections, she stopped acting and started drinking. A year later, she came home to Indiana and all its glittering optimism. It would be too much to take if she didn't drink.

No one knew Liz's secret, and she credited the deception to her acting skills. If Captain Sunshine found out she imbibed on the job, she'd blow a rose petal. Like the day she found her Five Bullet Friday list, a charred scrap in the garbage. Liz was glad someone had burned it, but it wasn't her. She might be an alcoholic, but she wasn't a numbskull. She needed a job, and Lucy loved her bulleted lists. When she found the list in the garbage, her face turned as red as the lipstick Liz used to wear on the set: Red, Red, You're Dead. And she put Liz on probation.

Liz tied her brown tweed coat shut with a quick knot. It might be spring, but the morning was chilly. If she hurried, she could spike a cup of hot chocolate from The Coffee Stop. Nothing took the sting out of her job like peppermint schnapps. She would need it to survive her quarterly evaluation.

She crossed the street, the same street she'd crossed as a kid. Half the buildings were remodeled; the other half were shut down or boarded up. The world kept turning, like the soap opera said, but she was stuck in the same dismal daydream, a sad refrain too hard to hear.

Doctor Zhivago was playing at the theater, the marquee a dazzling array of color against the drab day, and she paused without knowing it. She hoped no impressionable girls were in the audience tonight. At the awkward age of twelve, Liz had no trouble seeing the resemblance between herself and Greta Garbo when her mom pointed it out during a showing of *Anna Karenina*. With zero friends and no boyfriend, she needed to hear it. Even today. The problem was, there was no one left to tell her.

A man in a navy suit bumped into her, cutting short the memory. The bottle of schnapps sloshed in her tweed coat pocket.

"Watch it," he said.

"Thank you." The words were unexpected and surprised the man and her. But she was glad to have the nightmare interrupted. She needed to get to work, and there was still the hot chocolate to buy. Her pocket grew heavier as she slouched toward The Coffee Stop.

#2 Work Hard

Joe often said you were either an owner of a company or you weren't. He thought it made him sound smart. Plus, he planned on becoming a part owner of Travel World. He was fifty today, and he was going to ask Lucy. She would say yes; she had to. She needed a partner, and he was her best employee. The others were women. Distracted women. Liz drank, Karen took care of an ill parent, and Miranda was just plain crazy. As a man, Joe was able to focus on his job.

He folded his hands, patiently waiting for his bus stop. He'd been patient his whole life, and today it would pay off. He'd worked his way up from hospitality, to retail, to travel agent. He'd made beds, for Christ's sake. He'd hung up clothes left in changing rooms by old women and teenage girls. He'd done it all for an hourly wage even as they laughed at him. Hateful, backstabbing bitches, the lot of them. Except for Lucy. She never laughed at him. She was a professional. Together, they would grow Travel World to new heights. Hell, maybe they'd even get married. He'd like to see at least one of the places he'd booked before he died.

Ahead of him, a millennial bobbed his head to the music blaring from his headphones, the bass beat loud and steady. Joe pretended to cross his legs, giving the boy's seat a jab. He'd forgone a car to save money. For two years, he'd endured this bus route: loud, stinky, and late. If he could endure a few more minutes, he would make it to Travel World before the others arrived.

The boy turned around. "Knock it off. It ain't hurting no one."

Joe blinked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, you do," said the boy, his brown eyes mocking. "Every day I sit here, and you kick my seat. I'm sick of it."

"Maybe you should sit somewhere else," said Joe. His hands were still on his lap, but they clenched into fists.

"Whatever." The boy motioned to the crowded bus. A girl smiled at him. "Keep your hands to yourself. That's all I'm saying."

It was too much. To be treated like he was a child or pervert. Who did he think he was? And all the while, the girl smiling and smiling and now the boy smiling back, enjoying the attention.

Joe's fist landed squarely in the kid's jaw, his earbuds slipping, which was the best part of the day. The worst part was the bus stopping because now he would be late. He would have to walk the rest of the way, or run. Damn the boy and damn this bus too.

#3 Stay Positive

"How do you do it?" asked the bank teller.

"Do what?" answered Karen, but she knew the answer. Still, it would be impolite to assume.

"Stay so positive."

Karen flashed the teller her broadest smile—she had a variety of smiles—and took the envelope. "I count my blessings every day." Or most days. Karen nudged the thought out of her head as she left the bank. She had a lot to be thankful for: her health, her happiness, her job. Lucy had promised her a trip to the Bahamas if she met her yearly sales goal, and Karen had. Actually, she'd met it for the last four years and was looking forward to her long-awaited reward.

Karen inhaled a refreshing breath, liking the crack of cool air. This was her year. She was Lucy's first and longest employee. And Lucy knew how desperately Karen needed this vacation.

Her eyes met an old woman's, and Karen gave her a fake smile before let-

ting it drain from her face. Karen couldn't imagine her mom out in the cool spring weather, or any weather for that matter. Her mom moved in with her three years ago, and her Parkinson's disease grew more crippling every day since. First came the cane, then the walker, and now a bib. All this at fifty-nine years old. And yet here was an ancient woman, seventy-five at least, smiling with her brilliant lipstick and wearing Jimmy Choos. Sometimes the inequity of it got to Karen, and she clenched her jaw as she was doing now. Then she remembered all the good times she and her mom shared.

When Dad was alive and Mom was well, they used to bike around the lake every morning. Karen loved the smell of grass, damp and mossy, and the ripple of grebes on the water. The lake must be thawed by now, and she tried hard to picture it, but couldn't. The memories became dimmer as the disease progressed, draining them both, like a slow leak in a tire going nowhere.

Karen flicked away the problem, a gnat on her otherwise promising morning. Today was a good day. Mom used the walker to go to the bathroom and even ate breakfast. Plus it was Friday. Payday. Karen had almost made it two weeks without a stop at the bank. *Almost*. Parkinson's wasn't a disease someone planned for, especially someone like Mom who was too busy working two jobs to think about retirement. And the money went so quickly. Karen wouldn't have believed it if it hadn't come from her own account. A vacation was out of the question unless Lucy came through, and she would. She had to.

Karen paused at the flower shop. In the front window was an enormous bouquet of daisies. Somewhere a fan turned, and it seemed as if the flowers were waving. She smiled, her secret way of waving back. That settled it. The happy blooms were Mom's favorite. After work, and after hearing the news about her trip, Karen would surprise Mom.

A bubble of real happiness welled inside her, and she giggled out loud.

#4 Overcome Obstacles

Miranda fingered the lighter in her hand, liking the weight of it. She'd always loved the smell of smoke, the way it crept inside her, lingering long after the fire was gone. It left its mark with a scent, a singe, a mark. It was powerful. There was nothing fire couldn't do.

The matches were a mistake. Miranda was the only one in the office who went to Topsy's, the name of the club on the matchbook. But burning the list was an impulse. After seeing it every week for an entire year, rubbing like flint on steel, she couldn't stop herself. Miranda would burn it again and again until it was gone, permanently. That's what she did when things got in her way. She burned them down.

She waited in the alley behind Travel World by a large red garbage bin that concealed the stink no one wanted around. Life was so predictable. It was almost too easy. Any second, Lucy would come out the door to greet the delivery driver, and Miranda would slip in. They had a thing for each other, Lucy and the delivery driver, Dan. Every day, they made out in the back of

the big brown truck. It was disgusting. Check that. *Lucy* was disgusting. Behind the perfection was a monster, and if there was anything Miranda knew, it was monsters. She'd lived with one for years.

Miranda sucked in the smell of pickles, a sandwich that had been discarded. It helped her focus on something besides Lucy. She didn't understand how Dan couldn't see what a fake Lucy was. A phony. They'd joked about her ass, how they could bounce a quarter off it. That was until Dan wanted a piece of it.

Miranda rubbed the lighter flint until her thumb felt as hot as a flame. The pain helped. The world could say whatever it wanted, but what men liked was a fantasy, and Lucy was good at pretending. The burnt list was a rip in the fairy tale. Miranda saw the flicker of fear in Lucy's eyes as she retrieved the list from the trash. Someone hated her enough to burn Five Bullet Friday. What would they do next? Lucy had wondered for a month. And every day it gave Miranda pleasure to see the look of dread on her face.

Dan pulled up, and Miranda lurched forward. She hated herself for it and dug her nail deeper into the flint. Dan wore his black jacket, the one he'd put around her shoulders the night he saw her outside her mom's apartment. It had been January, and the night frigid, but anything was better than listening to her mom and her boyfriend talk. They were all talkative, until the lights went out, and nothing was left but their hard, cruel bodies. But Dan was soft, like his jacket, and told her to keep it. He'd see her tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that. Then he started screwing Lucy, and she was invisible—again.

Miranda sparked the flame. He would see her today.

#5 Celebrate Success

When Mark got the call from Travel World, the first thing that came to mind was his retirement party. It was tonight, and a murder investigation would delay it. It shouldn't have been his first thought, but it was, and after thirty-five years on the force, why not. He'd earned a break. He'd closed a hundred and sixty-six cases and didn't need to make it a hundred and sixty-seven to be a success. What he really wanted to do was spend the summer fishing at Hoosier National Forest with an old-fashioned woman, one who would cook his fish and buy his beer. A lady he could kiss goodnight.

But here he was, listening to another story from another girl about how she had nothing to do with a murder. No matter he'd found her hiding behind the garbage can in the alley. Her amber eyes darted back and forth like a tiger in a cage. He knew those eyes. If he was a betting man, which he wasn't, he'd guess domestic assault, and he'd be one-hundred percent right. In his opinion, it gave her an excuse for murder and for, well, just about everything. These kids went through hell, and you couldn't blame them for striking back at the world.

"Why don't you come inside," said Mark. "With the rest of your coworkers. You can tell me about it there." He motioned to Officer Tim to open the back door, gesturing for the girl to go first. He'd seen girls younger than her

run a city block in under twenty seconds. He wasn't going to give her a chance, no matter how young she was.

When they walked past Lucy Bell, she stopped and looked hard at the body.

"She's dead?" said Miranda.

Mark nodded. "Five bullets in the chest."

The girl made a noise, and Mark wondered if she would faint. Though she didn't look like the fainting type, he grasped her elbow. "Come over here."

The other employees were huddled near a display at the front of the room. The sign above them said, ESCAPE TO CANCUN! A fake palm tree stood in the corner. But they weren't going anywhere. Not until Mark was certain what had happened.

"Miranda," said Liz. "I didn't see you come in."

"She was out back, in the alley," said Mark.

Karen gave Miranda a side hug. "Can you believe it?"

"Lucy's gone," said Liz.

"It's terrible," said Joe. "People doing whatever they want. Mass shootings every day. Why don't you guys do something about it?"

"We *are* doing something, and I'm asking the questions, so keep your mouth shut." Mark didn't have to watch what he said anymore. He longed for the day he met a man like Joe on the street and could wallop him without fear of professional retribution.

He returned to Miranda. "You said you've been in the alley for a while. Did you see anyone leave out the back door?" When she didn't answer, Mark prodded. "Did you see anyone come in?"

Miranda fiddled with something in her pocket.

"So you did," said Mark.

"Probably just Dan," said Karen. She still had an arm around Miranda, mothering her through the ordeal. "He uses the rear entrance. For deliveries."

Joe snorted. "Deliveries and what else."

"Were this Dan and the victim involved in a romantic relationship?" Mark asked. "Is that what you're saying?"

The women looked to one another for assurances.

"So they were," said Mark.

No one refuted his statement. Joe gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

"We don't want to assume," said Karen, her eyes full of care. "Especially now. But it did seem as if she and Dan had *something* going. They spent a lot of time in the, uh, truck."

"And Miranda, you saw this Dan come in this morning?"

Her brown eyes flickered amber. "I saw him leave. He was in a hurry."

Mark wrote down Dan's name and place of employment. The sooner he got a hold of Dan, the better. Still, he had to cover all his bases. "What happened to your eye, Joe?"

"I hit a guy, and he hit me back," said Joe. "On the bus."

The response was immediate and probably true. Mark had dealt with guys

like Joe on many occasions. They were raging inside, waiting to whip the world. Did he kill Lucy Bell? Mark doubted it but asked anyway, "Do you argue with Ms. Bell?"

"Never," said Joe. "She was an upright woman and a good boss." His chest puffed with pride. "I would never hurt her. Like I told you before, she was dead when I got here."

Karen nodded. "He's telling the truth. I walked in right behind him."

Mark trusted Karen. She was a good person, the kind you could depend on in a pinch. He turned to Liz. "And what about you?"

"I was at The Coffee Stop," said Liz. "Ask the barista. Ask anybody. I got here a few minutes before you did."

Mark could follow up on that easy enough. He himself was a frequent customer.

His mind wandered to his retirement party as he scanned the office, papered with posters and brochures and lists. Maybe he would take a trip this year. Why not? He'd certainly earned it and had heard a lot of good things about Cancun from his friend Bill.

He meandered toward a bulletin board. A Hawaiian lei outlined the frame. Unlike at the precinct, information was printed on colored paper with a fancy font. No wonder they liked working here. He removed a yellow tack. "What's this?"

"Five Bullet Friday," said Miranda.

Something about the way she said *bullet* lodged in his brain. For no reason, he counted the employees: Karen, Miranda, Liz, Joe. One, two, three, four. He wasn't sure why the number was important. Four . . . four . . . four. He shook his head. It had nothing to do with the five bullets on the list or the five bullets in the victim. Five. There was no connection.

Secretly, he wondered if overwork had made him senile before his time. Tonight he would get drunk and forget he was turning sixty-seven this year.

"Lucy posted the lists every Friday to keep us motivated," said Karen. A choke escaped her throat. "She was thoughtful like that. I miss her already." A tear ran down her cheek.

"Me too," said Miranda and Liz in unison.

"Yeah," added Joe.

Mark felt bad for the wayward group. The economy was decent. It would absorb the loss. They would find jobs somewhere else. But not like Travel World. He doubted there was another employer in town like Lucy Bell.

Mark resolved to find Dan and bring him to justice, and before tonight's party. But the medical examiner had pulled his van around, and Mark needed to move. They would be taking Lucy out the front entrance.

The wheels on the stretcher squeaked as it drew near. Even after years on the force, Mark mourned the loss. A nice gal, fit and good looking. Maybe old fashioned, too, for on her lapel was a pristine spray of flowers like his grandma used to wear.

Whodunnit?

The ending of this story has been removed so that we can discuss our theories during the meeting. In the meantime, you can use this character sheet to help you form your own theory.



Lucy Bell
Owner



Barry
Florist



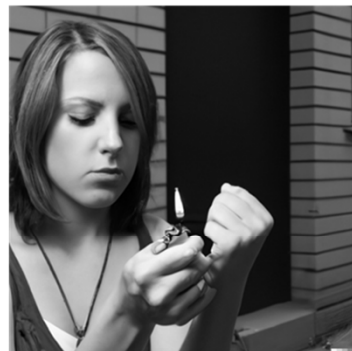
Liz
Employee



Joe
Employee



Karen
Employee



Miranda
Employee



Dan
Delivery Man



Mark
Detective