

The Romance of an Office Rat

by Marc Zeedar

"You may pass," said the tinny voice of the grill. A green light went on above the exit.

The shiny sphere rotated upward until the tiny black dots that were eyes and the pink sliver that was a mouth were visible. A slender crimson tongue emerged suddenly, but quickly retreated. The head gave a slight nod. Then the man gripped his briefcase tighter, pushed hastily at the door, and was gone.

Mr. Leslie Plato Hearse paused for a moment outside the scanning booth. Inside, his heart was swelling and contracting at a rate that couldn't possibly be healthy. Around him a dozen streams of rush flowed together into a massive river of flesh that poured through the corridor.

Down the river he was swept, a gray overcoat blending with hundreds, his pale pate bobbing among the faceless dark hats and heads of full, luscious hair.

Every few steps coats would vanish into the bare white walls along the path. Silent elevators shot figures upward into oblivion. For Leslie, it was one-hundred-and-twelve paces to the entrance of Brown and Browne. It was always a battle to reach the left lane in time, to slip through the doorway with the minimum of disturbance.

With the door firmly shut behind him, the rush of the world was a figment of the imagination. In here there were only the faintest sounds: the dull shuffling of paper, the distant beeps of computers and fax machines, the hum of voices deep with intense concentration. Occasionally there was movement in the outskirts of the eye, so swift and silent it seemed like an illusion.

Through the maze of temporary walls Leslie strode with short quick steps of practiced skill. He dodged, weaved, and spun around corners at fantastic speeds. Left, right, right, left, right, left, left, straight, stop. He was home.

The briefcase slid unopened to its spot beside the desk. The coat was flung to its peg by the entrance. The worn chair, molded by a decade of heavy labor, was precisely contoured to fit the shape of Leslie's squat frame.

The computer beeped dully when he pressed it on; he ignored it. In the seven and a half years since it was installed he'd used it twice. It was no different from the neglected staple remover or the faded Hawaiian sunset postcard pinned to his wall.

For a long hour he sat, never moving. At ten minutes to ten he took an envelope from his "in" box and opened it. Inside was a blank form. He took it, laboriously filled in every square, both sides, folded it into a neat rectangle, and sealed it in an envelope. The envelope went into the "out" tray.

At ten minutes to noon, there was a rattle by his door. A young man took the envelope from the tray, deposited it on his wheeled cart with a mountain of similar envelopes, placed several envelopes in the "in" box, and departed.

At noon Leslie opened his briefcase and removed a small bag. From it he extracted a tuna sandwich, a square of chocolate, a tangerine, and carton of juice. The sandwich was consumed with all the passion of a mortician digging a grave, scoop by scoop, bite by bite. The chocolate was placed on the tongue and savored. Leslie eyed his watch, the seconds ticking off slowly. Finally, he swallowed.

"Seventy-nine seconds," he thought with satisfaction. "Almost beats my record."

He drank the juice, then deliberately set about peeling the miniature orange. The seeds were extracted with care, and he spent several minutes removing every strand of stray white pulp from the tiny fruit slices. Each was swallowed with slow precision, thoroughly chewed.

Lunch finished, the remains were swept into the wastebasket, which contained yesterday's lunch bag, a chocolate wrapper, an empty juice carton, and the shriveled peelings of a tangerine.

At five o'clock precisely Leslie stood, retrieved his coat and briefcase, and joined the flow of his colleagues out into the busy city. Like a marching band the troop walked the block and a half to the opening in the cement, descended the stairs, and in perfectly coordinated movements, separated into various streams of swiftly moving dull gray figures. Leslie's stream jostled their way onto a silver car, sat and rocked for the appropriate amount of time, then, one by one, departed.

At the Mayfair exit Leslie emerged, went up some stairs, walked several blocks to a towering structure of concrete, and vanished inside.

He reappeared fourteen hours and forty-five minutes later and retraced his steps, emerging before the great silver and glass structure in the heart of the business district. The spinning doorway required deft timing to enter, matching the pace and push of the other occupants, and then he was through and facing the queue before the scanning booths.

Once again, his heart began to beat. His throat became dehydrated and raw, while his palms moistened. His was booth eleven, and the closer he approached, the more nervous he became.

He could see the intimidating black glass of the enclosed tower above the booth. Though he knew there were two people inside, one monitoring booth eleven, the other booth twelve, he could see no one. But he knew she was there. He could feel her watching him, the pressure on his chest enormous.

The man in front of him stepped into the booth. There was a brief delay and then the panel slid open for Leslie. He marched inside, feeling weak and dizzy.

"Good morning," said the voice.

The round head bobbed awkwardly. The voice, when it came, was as dry and as crumbly as rice paper.

"morning," Leslie croaked.

The glow traveled carefully down his body while he stood patiently still.

"You may pass."

The sweet melody of the familiar phrase hung over him like perfume. With a quick glance upward at the anonymous black speaker grill, he shut his eyes and pushed passed the green light.

At his desk, he sat in his chair and breathed. "You must speak to her," he whispered. "You must!"

Trembling, he snatched up his scratch pad and tore off a sheet. He stared at the brown "Brown and Browne" logo and pondered his situation. Finally he tore off a second sheet, placed the two together, and began to staple them. He put in a dozen staples, then eagerly, passionately, filled the sheet with staples.

The machine ran out and he was forced to search his drawer for another row of staples. He loaded and clicked the unit shut and continued his stapling frenzy.

Exhausted, he stared at the meaningless sheet of glinting metal and smiled. He took up the staple remover and began to carefully extract each staple. He carefully swept the pile of bent, twisted wires into the trash can, the tinkling shower sounding like distant rain.

At five o'clock Mr. Leslie Plato Hearse departed. In his trash can were myriad bits of metal and a dozen blank sheets of notepaper so pierced by countless pinholes they were more transparent than opaque.

The next morning, Leslie entered the scanning booth with a boldness that astonished even him. He didn't wait for the greeting but immediately looked right up at the speaker and said, "Good morning!" even before the door was closed behind him.

"Good morning," answered the voice.

"It's a beautiful day outside," Leslie said as the scan light caressed his body.

"You may pass."

"Thank you." He gripped the briefcase tightly and nodded upward. Then he was gone.

His heart sang as he traversed the maze to his desk. He'd spoken to her! He'd really done it!

All those years of hearing her daily welcome, listening to her greet him, and he'd never dared. She was a faceless unknown, a voice without a body. Why did she intimidate him so? Was it because she could see him and he couldn't see her? What did that matter? He didn't care what she looked like: he felt he knew her. He knew her soul, anyway. He could feel it in her voice. Today she'd sounded brighter, happier. Could that have been a sign?

The next morning Leslie was back. He smiled at the grill. "Good morning!"

"Good morning."

"My name is Leslie, by the way."

"You may pass."

"Thank you. See you Monday!"

Confidence and power flowed through Leslie's features as he marched to his desk. He couldn't stop smiling. At ten o'clock he went to the break room. Ignoring the crowded coffee pot, he filled a paper cup from the water fountain and drained it. He filled himself a second as he looked around.

There was a woman in red he vaguely recognized as from accounting. And wasn't that guy named Bill? Didn't he work in sales?

Leslie nodded and smiled at people, returning to his desk with his water cup. He took a circuitous route, just for the challenge, amused by the puzzled stares he received. He was in unknown territory, a stranger in a strange place. At five, he took a different route to the door. It was less efficient, but more interesting.

For a week or two, Leslie continued to expand his horizons. Every day began with his morning conversation with the unknown security woman. Each day he dared a little more, spoke a little longer. For the first time in a decade the man noticed the weather, the smoggy air smelled laundry fresh, and he smiled on the way to town.

One day, Leslie was beaming with excitement when he entered the scanning booth.

"Good morning," said the grill.

Leslie's heart flipped. No one could deny the touch of excitement and recognition in the voice!

As the scan light descended, he worked up his courage. "How late do you work?" he asked boldly.

"You may pass," she answered, but he could detect her amusement. He smiled.

At ten o'clock Leslie left the office. He'd never left during the day before, and was surprised to notice the corridors and elevators were nearly as busy as in the morning. Faceless people marched back and forth all day, apparently. Strange that he'd never noticed that before.

He went straight to the lobby where he could see the scanning booths. There was barely a line to enter them, and several were vacant. If his calculations were correct, it should be time for her to break for lunch. The building opened at six, and they couldn't work her for more than four hours without a lunch break. He bought roses at the building's gift shop, and waited.

He waited until ten thirty, but she neither departed nor returned. The plexiglass security cage door never opened. Leslie waited a few more minutes, then returned to his desk. His calculations must have been wrong. No doubt she'd taken her break earlier.

At two o'clock, Leslie slipped away again. He noticed a couple people watching his

departure, but he didn't care. In ten years he'd never left once during the day. Didn't he deserve a break or two?

In the afternoon, the scanning booths were busier, but though Leslie waited for over an hour, no one emerged from the sixth security booth. Could he have missed her?

An idea hit him. He followed the flood out the main entrance, then immediately turned around and went back inside. He entered booth eleven with a pounding heart. The roses, slightly less fresh than this morning, were in his right hand.

"Good afternoon." He recognized her voice immediately!

"You work here all day? Don't they give you a break?"

"You may pass."

The green light glowed but Leslie didn't move.

"You may pass."

"Look, that's not fair, you know. You've got rights. They can't make you work without a break!"

"You may pass. Please exit the scanning booth now," said the woman, her voice growing stern.

Leslie frowned. "How many hours do you work? They pay you overtime?"

The green light on the door began to blink rapidly. The woman did not answer.

Leslie started to say something more when a dark-skinned man in a gray-blue uniform loomed in front of him. A photographic badge hanging from his shirt pocket identified him as a security guard.

"Sir, you're free to go on through. Is there a problem?"

Leslie glared at the man. "Yes there is. Why aren't the security women given a lunch break?"

"Excuse me?"

"The security people." Leslie waved his hand upward at the security cage. "Don't they

have rights?"

The guard frowned, his forehead knotting. "There's nobody up there."

"What?"

"It's computers, sir. Recordings. They haven't had people up there for oh, seven or eight years now."

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