



The Office Microcosm

Michael Casey

I understand there is a tradition to quote some fine lines at the beginning of a foreword, so I mention Shakespeare's words: "the law's delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the undeserved take," proof not only that Shakespeare worked in an office but that he worked in my office.

There is no heavy lifting in the office, but the work situation is never an idyll. There is stress and abuse and the gamut of whines. For a writer, it is a gold mine, beauty and tragedy and wonder. Boredom and violence, meanness and generosity. In a wink you can see it all.

The interaction ritual is superb, simultaneously intimate and distant. There will be the most kindred spirits who for dozens of year will never see each other outside a huge room filled with gray desks in cubicles. In today's commuter world you may live eighty miles from the colleague in the next desk. In the office there are people who know secrets nobody else would know or want to know. Who has the chocolate donut or two with orange juice every morning?

I realize there are analogs to the office situation everywhere. In a bakery or summer ice-cream stand, a factory or military unit, there are lackeys and greater or lesser tyrants, thieves, conspirators, and perpetual victims. But the office seems more definitive a paradigm to me, a lasting entity. I mean you can distinguish differences within archetypes and you recognize that these characters will be together a very long time. No exit.

The setting appears more common than you might think in cultural stories, now, past, and distant past. The performance artist Claudia Shear has a fabulous account of office work. The Charles Laughton clerk in the movie "The Millionaire" was always a hero of mine. The recent movie "Office Space" (I am not mentioning the character I relate to) has an associate you could easily see in "The Overcoat."

In terms of reflecting society, the office works in microcosm, the interactions in a cast of characters, saints and psychotics can be pure drama and poetry at best. The people are all different and in a way all beautiful. The stories are real and timeless; I believe it is a study worthy of a writer's talent.

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