

**Peter Wyborn**

## THE OFFICE

"Your writing is amateurish." She looked through Peter into the undoubted professionalism that was behind her own creation. The Office.

Peter lay gaping like a hooked fish. He picked up his brief case, not with purpose, but in self defence. His hand went out to the manuscript, its many wasted journeys.

In her hand the manuscript became a metal claw. As he wavered in front of her it tore at his belly, emptying his stomach on to the ground. His colleagues could see his condition and left him alone. No-one wanted to get involved.

She looked down at her hands. A shiver of repulsion ran through her body as she realised what she held. She handed the manuscript quickly back to Peter and wiped her hands down the front of her butcher's apron.

Peter left. The office settled.

Her creation stood before her. She swallowed it with her eyes. Her soul infused the walls.

Her office. The modern office. It did not operate by clicking machines or kilometres of cable. No busy feet scuffed polished corridors. There were no greasy hand marks left on the corners of walls. No clerks were buried under reams of paper. They had been removed. Before her stood a Serengeti.

This was a modern office. It was built on words. Long words, with many syllables and even more meanings. Some words had to be turned on their sides to get their true meaning. If you weren't careful you could say the wrong thing. You were then terminated.

Modern words had contracts and legal, binding documents. They hung deliberately in the walk-ways. If you were clumsy you could get spiked and cut. You had to be able to manage words in the modern office. You had to be able to build whole phrases. Each upon the other until you climbed to the top of some vast pyramid. It was so high that no-one could see the top.

She knew what was at the top. A ladder climbed up and up from her smile. Beneath the smile was the office.

You could tell that she had seen every meaning of the word before she used it. Those waiting for the words to arrive were pleased. She was always most gracious to those above her.

Office workers tapped away. Not at keyboards containing figures and letters but at each other. Everywhere office workers struck at each other with metal keys, with poisoned words attached to them. It was the only means of securing their positions.

This was her creation. It had finally come to pass. Years before she had suffered. People had run about everywhere; far too many people. People with their own answers. People making their own decisions; people with their own offices.

She lent over the counter and smiled at her office. The smile bent over her world. It touched the sterile white walls. It flew to lift shafts and danced on the water cooler. But everywhere it flew she read her words. She felt their edge with her lips. They blocked thoroughfares like tank tracks. This was her security.

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The office confused Peter. He was a timid man. Words tricked him up. They got under his feet and tripped him. He was always trying to catch them but they slipped from his grasp and attacked him.

He was left defenceless; surrounded by the mausoleum walls. Somewhere she was hiding. All he had was his laugh.

It wasn't a proper one. Not like she used. Peter had never learnt how to laugh. He tried to imitate the others but he knew that he was doing something wrong. Whenever he laughed he felt their alienation. He must have said something very rude. He was never sure how you could laugh without offending someone.

But he had to warn them. The words were threaded together. If you slipped up everyone knew about it at once. They were wired with trip wires. One mistake and the alarms would ring and they would take you away.

Even She would listen if he wrote it down. If he could write down how it had once been. They would be able to see the real Peter. They might even show him how to laugh.

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Peter rushed home to his house. He imagined all sorts of dreams. Out in the garden he hosed the thirsty camellia trees. He made sure their bases were kept clear. They were delicate trees and easy to kill.

His next door neighbour was a kindly lady. She hailed Peter down for a talk, but he was busy today. It felt good to say that. He replied with a wave of his garden gloves. "I've important office work to do. I'm sorry I can't stop, Kindly Neighbour."

Peter started to write. He wrote over all the paper he could find. He even used the back of used Xerox paper. He even wrote on the walls. His neighbour saw his light on and was surprised. Peter always put his lights out early. They had commented about it in the neighbourhood. He was always so reliable.

He wrote all the way to work. He wrote on his time sheet, in front of her, and never even thought to say "Good Morning." His pen began to grow. It grew so big that he didn't notice the office. He wondered if he could go on writing, forever. He'd like to write about his garden. There were many happy things to write about the garden.

The office workers also saw how big Peter's pen was growing. "What are you doing?" they demanded. "Why are you ignoring us?"

It was exciting to be discovered. Better even than being in the garden.

Peter worked harder. He never had time for his Kindly Neighbour.

"Your camellias need watering, Mr Weitan."

Peter shrugged. It felt good to be busy. Too busy to get down to the garden. "Sorry. I can't stop now. Maybe tomorrow."

He could feel his world expanding. The Kindly Neighbour started to look small and silly. Peter hesitated. This must be how She feels.

Peter looked at his new horizons. His world seemed to be getting as big as the office.

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He waited till it was lunch time. When they were in the lunchroom he would present them with his manuscript. Once they had read it his life would change. The office would go back to how it was.

He handed it over to them. As he did, the umbilical chord connecting him to the child of his thoughts broke. Just as the birth waters broke She walked in. It was like a lion at calving. Peter saw his child mauled and carried away. Its limbs were shredded. Unreined, yellow teeth bit into the soft flesh.

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After the child was buried Peter's life settled down. Some paid condolences; but none would look at the dead child. Peter tripped and left the lunchroom. Eventually he would be replaced. He felt the wires become snagged about his feet. He knew he would be terminated.

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His Kindly Neighbour was pleased to find Peter back in the garden. The camellias looked like they could do with a good watering. "Hello Mr Weitan? Have you got your gloves? Your light went out early last night."

Peter never answered. He had all the time in the world.