

BEYOND THE CUBICLE

for Eric Kettle

One day I was looking for Eric
who works with me
at the dreadful place where the supervisors
imagine themselves prison guards
where we have to put on cards
our comings and goings
and every moment of lateness or early leaving
has to be accounted for
but if during eight hours we redeem the world
or just twiddle our thumbs
no one cares —
one day I was looking for Eric
but couldn't find him

The next day I wasn't looking for Eric
so he came down the corridor
I said to him I was looking for you yesterday Eric
were you sick is that why I couldn't find you?
I wasn't sick replied Eric
that is I was sick but I came in anyway
for I have no more sick leave left
at nine I checked in at five I checked out
but all the rest of the time I slept
the day before I had been drinking
and yesterday I had a headache

I often have a headache
I told Eric
but I've never been able to sleep at work
women can fall asleep in the women's room
there's a sofa there but in the men's room
there's nothing and men can't enter

the women's room so tell me Eric
where do you fall asleep?

Oh don't you know said Eric
in the men's room beyond the middle cubicle
there's a wooden door and if you open it
there's a little dark area behind it
where the water gas and hydro pipes
go up and down
to the fourth and second floors
I usually sleep there when I have a hangover
Really? I marvelled — show it to me
Eric came and showed it to me
how can you sleep there Eric
aren't you afraid that you'll fall down to the second floor
through the gap beside the planking
oh not at all said Eric
and with that he climbed into the area
you see if I curl up like this on my right side
and I raise my left arm just so
and I lean my right leg back by the waterpipe
then I can't fall through
while I fall asleep my limbs grow numb
so I can't move
so I never fall down

That evening I drank too much
and the next day I took a piece of wood with me
and covered the hole with it
so I wouldn't fall in because Eric's words
were not one hundred per cent convincing
I must have thrashed about in my sleep
because when I woke up two or three bricks
had loosened and fallen out
and I saw
there was another hollow behind the wall

The next day I told Eric
that there was another room take a look
but Eric said that we shouldn't go there today
because it was Martin's day to sleep let's not disturb him
but tomorrow let's both of us
bring hammers and smocks
under our coats of course so they won't notice
and see what's back there
next day we did that took in tools
and widened the hole in the wall
and hammered the pipes
so they wouldn't hinder our trespassing to the other room

Martin brought wires
and bulbs and from then on
we could see how we were progressing and where we were going
in two weeks we had a regular room there
and painted the walls
Charlie had brought in some thick broadloom

The desk was quite hard to take apart
and reassemble inside
but we had no trouble getting the bookshelf in
nor Margaret's flowers
the chamber was soon quite commodious and homey

Anne proposed
hanging drapes across the wall
as if there were a window behind them
and one night as a surprise Lucy
mounted mirrors on the side wall
so the room looked twice as big as it was

In the morning we would read and listen to poems
in the afternoon we played
classical records on the record-player
but as Martin and Lucy wanted to dance

I had to bring along my dance records
and from then on every morning
we held soirees instead and every afternoon
the chamber was occupied by one couple at a time

One morning Mr. Cork the supervisor
noticed that Chiang was checking in
with a chessboard which he
didn't have when he checked out at five
he asked Chiang where it was
but Chiang just stuttered and blushed
the next day Cork assigned his assistant Kirk
to keep an eye on Chiang
Kirk did just that and followed Chiang
into the men's room but a few seconds later
when Kirk entered the room was empty
Kirk couldn't understand how

Afterwards Kirk noticed that
not only Chiang but twenty-five others
were disappearing each day without a trace
one by one he confronted us
Margaret burst out crying and confessed everything
we were very frightened what would happen now

Cork and Kirk called all twenty-six of us
into the boardroom
unfolding a blueprint for us
they explained that what we had told them yesterday
was a lie because the wall of the building
was an outer wall
and the room we were all babbling about
would have to hang suspended in the air
we naturally grew mad by this time and told them
To go and see for themselves with their own eyes
They did that and when they came back
They said they saw only pipes running vertically

in a little dark area
with no little room behind it at all

The next day bricklayers came
took off the wooden door
and walled in the cubicle
due to all the hammering
from the wall of our little room
where drapes curtained a non-existent window
a brick fell
and landed on the head of the parking-lot attendant
the police came to investigate
and found the whole affair rather fishy
because although no bricks were missing from the outer wall
still a brick had fallen from the wall

Also we surveyed the wall from the street
and everything was as the blueprint showed
the room existed only inside the building
you could enter it from the inside
but from the outside there was only a brick wall
nothing else

Since then all twenty-six of us work more
but when any of us meet in the corridor
we smile at each other like accomplices
hinting at our secret
this warm smile binds us together
we know that the room exists
even if the bureaucrats don't see it
even if it is walled in
our proof is not only our memory
but the fact that the brick hit the man on the head
and also the fact that since then
we can't find in our homes
certain carpets paintings vases of flowers
drapes records

We secretly have hopes
that in a few years the whole matter
will be completely forgotten
Cork and Kirk will be promoted to the head office
and the new supervisors will know nothing about the affair
and then some evening
we will tear out the new bricks
replace them with the wooden door
so that when the stupidity around us
becomes unbearable
so that when we want to love and be loved again
we can climb above the dull and drab
and grope our way through the dark chamber
and enter again the beautiful warm room
where no one will disturb us
and smooth music will play
where our headaches will pass
and where space or spacelessness
and time or timelessness
will dissolve into one another
and grow into one thing

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