

THE WORKER

by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

MAN

WOMAN

THE MESSENGER

SETTING

An apartment.

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THE WORKER

[A nondescript apartment. There is nothing to differentiate this apartment from any other apartment in any other building in any other city. A young WOMAN, also nondescript, sits in a rocking chair, cradling an infant tenderly in her arms. Lost in thought, she is slow to notice the scuffling of feet just outside the apartment door. Suddenly her eyes grow wide—she lunges out of the chair, looks about the room in a panic, stuffs the baby into a bureau drawer, and disappears into the hallway. A few moments later, a young MAN enters carrying an enormous stack of files and papers. He places this stack carefully in the middle of the room—then exits and returns with another stack. Again, he exits, this time returning with a briefcase and a computer. He repeats these steps, stumbling in and out of the apartment, until he has fashioned a gigantic mound in the middle of the room which includes a fax machine, two printers, a garbage can, a paper shredder, several trays of office supplies, a filing cabinet, an entire desk—perhaps even a whole cubicle, complete with wall-dividers, potted plants, and a fish tank. Finally, he closes the door behind him.]

MAN

[His usual greeting.]

I'm home.

[He loosens his tie and waits for a response, but none is forthcoming. He hesitates.]

I'm ... I'm home.

[Still no response. He scratches his head, puzzled.]

Hello?

WOMAN

[Offstage.]

In here!

MAN

I said I was—

WOMAN

In the kitchen!

MAN

Aren't you going to—

[The WOMAN scurries into the room wearing an apron and oven mitts. She kisses her husband dutifully on the cheek and scurries back towards the kitchen.]

MAN

Wait.

[The WOMAN stops.]

What are you doing?

WOMAN

I'm just finishing up dinner.

MAN

It's ... it's not ready?

[Pause.]

I don't understand. It's always ready. When I walk in the door, it's—

[Pause.]

Am I early?

[He checks his watch.]

WOMAN

No, you're right on time.

MAN

Was there some sort of natural disaster? An earthquake? Is there something you're not telling me? Are you injured?!

WOMAN

No, I just—

[Noticing the gigantic mound of work-related items in the center of her living-room.]

What's all this?

MAN

Oh ... nothing. Just a few things from work.

WOMAN

A few things? Why, it's practically you're whole—

[A sudden realization.]

Oh my god! You've been fired!

MAN

No!

WOMAN

No?

MAN

No, nothing like that.

WOMAN

Oh, thank heavens!

[Pause.]

I don't understand. You haven't been fired ... but you're entire office is sitting in the middle of our living room.

MAN

It's not the entire office. Just my cubicle. And ... you know, my desk. And a few other little things.

WOMAN

[At a loss.]

Do you want me to *wash it*?

MAN

No, I ...

[Pause.]

All right, look ... I didn't want to tell you, but I've fallen behind.

WOMAN

What do you mean?

MAN

At work. I've fallen behind. I can't keep up.

WOMAN

Why not? You spend practically every waking moment there.

MAN

Well... recently, they've ... ahh ... they've let a few people go.

WOMAN

That's awful! How can they treat people like that? Just lay them off! It's heartless! Don't they have any sense of social responsibility?

MAN

Well, they didn't lay them off exactly ... not in the traditional sense.

WOMAN

What then?

MAN

Let's just say they've been encouraged to move on.

WOMAN

Isn't that the same thing?
[Pause.]

MAN

I really shouldn't talk about it.

WOMAN

All right.

MAN

Anyway, the point is that every day there are fewer and fewer people doing the same amount of work. They have me running the accounting department entirely by myself!

WOMAN

You've been promoted to management?!

MAN

No, it's just me—there's no one to manage! I do everything! The whole department!

WOMAN

The whole department? By yourself?

MAN

That's not all! I'm also expected to take incoming calls because there's no receptionist, fix the computers because there's no tech department, field customer complaints because there's no customer service! I'm in charge of the mail room, the cafeteria, janitorial services, research and development! Last week, human resources was let go, the whole department, and I received a memo—which I'd actually typed myself because there's no secretary—instructing me to familiarize myself with all applicable state and federal guidelines! Tomorrow, I'm supposed to start mediating all employee disputes! I have no idea what I'm doing! I'd ask the legal department for advice, but I've never studied law so I wouldn't know what to tell myself! And to top it all off, I have to take the owner's dog out to poop four times a day! At regular intervals! He has stomach problems and he's on a very strict schedule!

WOMAN

Well, you'll just have to tell them it's too much.

MAN

I can't.

WOMAN

Why not? Maybe they'll hire some of those poor people back.

MAN

You don't understand. It's too late for that.

WOMAN

Why is it too late?

[Pause.]

MAN

Look ... there's really nothing to worry about. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm just going to have to do some work from home if I want to catch up, that's all.

WOMAN

Work from home?

[He nods.]

But ... that's our time! If you work from home, I'll never see you! We'll never have time to—

MAN

I don't really have much choice.

[Pause.]

WOMAN

All right. Fine.

[Pause.]

I'll just finish dinner.

[She goes. The MAN sighs and rubs his eyes. He looks around the room, pushes the couch out of the way, and begins setting up his cubicle. He takes a pile of papers and looks for a place to put them—opens the bureau drawer. His face turns dark as he pulls the “baby” from the drawer.]

MAN

What is this?!

WOMAN

[Offstage.]

What is what?

MAN

THIS! What is THIS?!!!

[She enters—finds him holding the “baby.”]

How many times have I told you?!

WOMAN

You didn't say—

MAN

There will be no children in this house!

WOMAN

It's not—

MAN

No talk of children! No representations of children! No dolls, no drawings, no finger puppets!

WOMAN

But it's only—

MAN

I don't care! Get rid of it!

[He throws the doll at her.]

WOMAN

What?

MAN

You heard me.

WOMAN

You ... you want me to—

MAN

Destroy it! Burn it! Crush it into little pieces! Leave it in an alley somewhere! I don't care! But it can't stay here! I won't allow it! Not in this house!

[She glares at him, then turns and exits with the doll. She returns a moment later with the doll stuffed under her dress. Perhaps she has added a pillow or blanket as well to help disguise the doll. It gives her the appearance of being pregnant. After a few moments, the MAN senses her presence but does not look at her.]

Please try to understand. I don't mean to be cruel. It's for your own good. I'm only trying to protect you.

WOMAN

Protect me?

MAN

Yes.

WOMAN

From what?

[Pause.]

MAN

You ... you wouldn't understand.

WOMAN

You don't think I'd make a good mother! That's what this is all about! You don't think I'm prepared! But how would you know? You've never given me the chance!

MAN

No. It's not—

[He notices her belly for the first time.]

What's this?

WOMAN

What does it look like?

MAN

What do you think you're doing? Give it to me.

WOMAN

No!

MAN

Have you lost your mind?

WOMAN

I'm going to keep this baby. I won't let you hurt her. If you touch one hair on her head, I will never forgive you!

MAN

You don't mean that.

WOMAN

Never!

MAN

Listen to me ... it's not a baby.

WOMAN

I don't care! It's mine! She's mine! She's all I have!

MAN

It's just an object. It has no feelings.

WOMAN

She does! She does have feelings! More than you!

MAN

That's enough.

WOMAN

Who do you think I talk to when you leave me all alone in this house?! Who do you think listens to me and keeps me from going completely insane?! Who do you think I share my dreams with?! Not you! You're never here! Who do you think comforts me and holds my finger when you call to say you're going to miss dinner again?! She's more real to me than you ever were!

MAN

I'm not going to argue with you.

WOMAN

Get away from me!

[He grabs her and sticks his hand up her dress.]

Help! Help! Someone—

[She struggles, but he removes the doll.]

Give her back!

MAN

No.

[He grabs his coat and moves toward the door. She tries to hold him back.]

WOMAN

Where are you going with my baby?! What are you going to do?!

MAN

Let go.

WOMAN

[Blocking the door.]

No! I won't let you!

MAN

Get out of my way.

WOMAN

Please! Don't do this! Don't—

[He drags her, screaming, from the door. Realizing that she cannot stop him, she collapses on the floor and begins to sob uncontrollably.]

MAN

When I return, I expect dinner to be waiting.

[In the midst of her sobbing, she begins to laugh, softly at first, but it grows louder and overpowers the tears.]

What's so funny?

WOMAN

Do you really expect me to cook for you after this?

MAN

Of course.

WOMAN

If I do, it'll only be to poison you and end your miserable life!

MAN

You say that now—you're angry. It's to be expected. But in time you'll forgive me. You may even realize I was right. And if not, well ... I'm capable of feeding myself. I didn't starve before I met you.

WOMAN

There are other things I can withhold.

MAN

What?

WOMAN

Other things I do for you ... in the dark ... secret things ... places I go ... services I perform ... words that I say ... certain indignities that I allow ... what if I were to ... forget? Forget how to do these things? Forget how to find these ... places?

MAN

Are you serious?

[She folds her arms, defiant.]

Fine. You can keep it.

WOMAN

Do you mean it?! Really?!

MAN

On one condition.

WOMAN

[Taking the doll from him and cradling it gently.]

Anything! Anything!

MAN

No one must ever see it. No one. Not even me. I mustn't know it's here. If I find it, I will destroy it.

WOMAN

But ...

[Pause.]

Shouldn't you ...

MAN

Shouldn't I what?

WOMAN

Shouldn't there be some ... well, some shared responsibilities? I mean, I shouldn't have to raise her alone.

MAN

You want to give me responsibilities?

WOMAN

Yes.

MAN

For the—

WOMAN

The child. Our child.

MAN

Fine. If it misbehaves, I'll punish it.

WOMAN

No. You'd be too harsh.

MAN

What do you want from me?

WOMAN

You could put her to sleep. And if she wakes during the night, you could hold her and pat her back.

MAN

It'd better not wake! I have to work in the morning!

WOMAN

You can't expect a baby to always sleep through the night. And if you're tired, you could take a day off every now and then. You have sick days.

MAN

I never take sick days!

WOMAN

That was before. Work was your only priority. Now there's a child to think of.

MAN

You see! This is how it starts!

WOMAN

How what starts?

MAN

There was a reason I wouldn't allow you to have this child!

WOMAN

Because you're selfish and only think of yourself!

MAN

No, because suddenly you expect me to take sick days and buy diapers and leave early to see it perform in school plays! You'll start calling me during work hours to tell me it's crawling or talking or taking its first poop! Word starts spreading that I'm not committed to my job anymore, and next thing you know, I end up like the others!

WOMAN

What others? The ones who were fired?

MAN

Yes! No! I told you, they weren't fired!

WOMAN

Then what?

[Pause.]

What?

MAN

[Under his breath—almost a whisper.]

They were killed.

WOMAN

What?

MAN

They were murdered! Executed!

WOMAN

Murdered?

MAN

Yes! Put to death!

WOMAN

Who murdered them?

MAN

The company! Who do you think?

WOMAN

But ... if the company wasn't happy with their performance, why didn't it just let them go? I mean, in the old fashioned sense?

MAN

I don't know. You can't expect me to understand the company's actions. It's a giant corporation. It doesn't think the way we do. Maybe it didn't want them to share trade secrets with the other companies. Maybe it didn't want to pay unemployment. Maybe it just wanted to avoid paperwork.

WOMAN

But ... they can't get away with that! Those poor people! We should call the authorities!

MAN

Shhh! Not so loud! Someone might hear! Besides, the authorities don't want to get involved. And, to be honest, these were not the best employees. I mean, they really did deserve some sort of punishment. Not death, you know, but they weren't pulling their own weight, and it was all handled very nicely. They threw a party beforehand and—

WOMAN

A party?

MAN

Yes.

WOMAN

Before they ...

[She motions slitting her throat. He nods.]

It seems a little strange. To throw a party for someone and then ...

MAN

It was the company's way of thanking them for whatever small contribution they'd made over the years. Each of them had a cake. One candle for every year of service. It was really quite touching. Some of them cried.

WOMAN

But—

MAN

I shouldn't have told you any of this, but I want you to understand my position. They mustn't question my dedication to the company. Not for one moment.

[She nods.]

Good. I'm glad you understand. If I've been harsh with you, it's only because I knew what the consequences of certain actions might be. You can see now that it wasn't out of arrogance or selfishness. I was looking out for us ... for the two of us. For our family. Now, we won't speak of this again. Ever. To anyone. It isn't safe. Agreed?

[Pause.]

Promise me.

WOMAN

I just think ... those poor people ... someone should—

MAN

Promise.

[Pause.]

WOMAN

All right. I promise.

MAN

Good girl.

[He kisses her.]

We have to look out for ourselves. There's nothing more we can do. It's not realistic. We go about our jobs—do the best we can—and try to be happy.

[There is a knock at the door.]

Who's that?

WOMAN

I don't know.

MAN

Did you invite someone for dinner?

WOMAN

No.

[The MAN looks through the peephole.]

Who is it?

MAN

I don't know. I can't tell.

WOMAN

Let me look.

[He steps out of the way. She looks through the peephole.]

MAN

Can you see anything?

WOMAN

No.

[There is another knock at the door.]

Should we answer?

I don't know.

MAN

Maybe they'll go away.

WOMAN

What if it's something important?

MAN

Like what?

WOMAN

I don't know.

MAN

[Pause. Another knock—louder. The MAN opens the door. A MESSENGER stands in the doorway holding a clipboard.]

Hello?

THE MESSENGER

I have a message for employee nine-zero-zero-eight-five-six-one dash B dash H dash three-three-three.

MAN

That's me.

THE MESSENGER

[Reading from his clipboard.]

The company wishes to inform you that there will be a party held in your honor Monday morning.

MAN

A ... a party?

THE MESSENGER

[Still reading.]

Cake will be served promptly at 8:00 AM.

MAN

There ... there must be some mistake.

THE MESSENGER

As always, tardiness is frowned upon.

MAN

But—

THE MESSENGER

What kind of cake would you like?

MAN

You don't understand!

THE MESSENGER

Chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry?

MAN

I'm a model employee!

THE MESSENGER

Chocolate, vanilla, or—

MAN

I've never even taken one sick day! Not one!

THE MESSENGER

Chocolate—

MAN

I'm running more than a dozen departments all by myself! I've just memorized the entire human resources handbook! The entire thing! I can quote it for you! Verbatim! I can quote it backwards! I'm a useful employee! Ask anyone! I'll ... I'll ... I'll work for free! I'll even forfeit my—

THE MESSENGER

CHOCOLATE, VANILLA, or STRAWBERRY?!!!

[Pause.]

Look ... I'm just trying to do my job. I have to look out for myself, you know. It's nothing personal.

[Pause.]

Chocolate, vanilla, or—

MAN

It doesn't matter.

THE MESSENGER

You have to choose.

MAN

I don't care.

THE MESSENGER

Chocolate then.

[The MESSENGER makes a note on his clipboard.]

How many years of service?

MAN

What?

THE MESSENGER

How many years have you been with the company? The candles. You get one for every—

MAN

I ... I don't remember. It's been—

THE MESSENGER

It's all right. I can check your file. Just sign here.

[The MAN signs reluctantly. The MESSENGER exits. Silence.]

MAN

I don't understand.

[Pause.]

I did everything they asked. Everything. I followed every rule. I never spoke out of turn. I brought donuts once a week. How could they question my ...

[Pause.]

Wait ... you ... you didn't tell anyone—did you?

WOMAN

Tell what?

MAN

About the child! The doll!

WOMAN
No. I ... I don't think so.

MAN
You don't *think* so?!

WOMAN
I ... I don't—
[A sudden realization. Horrified, she covers her mouth.]

MAN
Who?! Who did you tell?!

WOMAN
The other day, at the grocery store, I ... I ran into that woman, you know, from the company picnic ... the one with no bra ... with the cigarettes and the stringy hair—

MAN
My god! She hates me! How could you—

WOMAN
I only mentioned it to make her jealous!

MAN
You might as well have cut my head off yourself! That woman's had it out for me since day one! She wants my job! She's been watching like a hawk—waiting for me to slip up! She must have told them.
[Pause.]

WOMAN
What are we going to do?

MAN
Nothing.

WOMAN
But—

MAN
There's nothing we can do. It's over.

WOMAN

Maybe ... maybe you can tell them it was a mistake? Tell them she's lying! She made the whole thing up! Out of jealousy!

MAN

They'd find out the truth.

WOMAN

I'll deny it! I never said anything! She doesn't have any proof!

[Pause. He considers this.]

MAN

We'd have to destroy all the evidence.

WOMAN

What do you mean? What evidence?

[He looks at the doll. She clings to it protectively.]

No. Please.

MAN

It's the only way.

WOMAN

You don't know what you're asking.

MAN

I know what the ... the child means to you. But it's her or me. There's really no choice.

[Pause.]

Is there?

[Pause.]

Surely you wouldn't choose that thing over me.

[Silence.]

WOMAN

Her ... her name is Emma.

MAN

They're going to kill me.

[Pause.]

WOMAN

She discovered her feet the other day. I wish you could've seen it.

MAN

Do you understand what I'm telling you.

WOMAN

She can make animal sounds too. She can do lion, doggie, monkey, and duck.

MAN

I'm going to die. They're going to chop off my head.

WOMAN

She whacked the cat on the head this morning, and I told her that wasn't nice and she should say she was sorry. So she petted the cat on the head and said, "Sorry, Meow." Then she got the cat brush and started brushing him and said, "There go, Meow." It was so sweet.

MAN

She can't do that. She's an infant.

WOMAN

She's very advanced.

MAN

What am I saying? She's not even an infant—she's a doll!

WOMAN

She can count to ten.

MAN

She cannot!

WOMAN

She can. Sometimes she skips "seven" because it's harder than the others.

MAN

You're making that up!

WOMAN

No.

MAN

All right, then make her do it! C'mon! Right now!

WOMAN

She isn't in the mood.

MAN

Not in the mood!

WOMAN

She's not a trained monkey, you know.

[Pause.]

MAN

You're ... you're really going to let me die?

[Silence.]

WOMAN

Maybe you've misunderstood. Maybe they're really throwing you a party. Just a party. Maybe they want to thank you for all the extra hours you've put in.

[Pause.]

You should probably get your work done. Just in case. We'll leave you alone now. I'm sure you don't want any distractions.

[Pause.]

Emma and I will keep our fingers crossed for you.

[To the doll.]

Won't we, Emma?

[Pause.]

Tell Daddy, "Bye-bye."

[Pause.]

Bye-bye, Daddy.

[The WOMAN exits. The MAN remains standing, motionless.]

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