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OFFICE IN A SMALL CITY

by Philip Davis

for New Girl

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OFFICE IN A SMALL CITY

SETTING: A corner office furnished with a simple desk and a chair. A door stands in the wall opposite the desk. On the desk are a calculator, telephone, pad and pencil, a clock radio, a thermos, a wind-up timer and a bell of the kind found on old hotel front desks.

*(At the desk sits **ARLISS FANCY**, a bookkeeper, punching numbers into the calculator, recording totals on the pad. He is shy, timid and efficient. **The telephone rings.** Arliss is startled. He collects himself and answers the phone.)*

ARLISS

Arliss Fancy speaking. *(listens)* Yes, Mr. Fry. I'm going over the monthly numbers now. *(listens)* Yes, sir. It looks good, sir. I should have the report finished within the half hour. No problem at all. I'll bring it in to your secretary for typing. *(listens)* Thank you, sir.

(Arliss returns to his work, punching numbers into the calculator, recording totals on his pad. The alarm on the clock radio goes off. Arliss is startled. Collecting himself, he shuts the alarm and takes a deep breath. He looks furtively around the room, then says to himself)

Time for a coffee break....

(Arliss winds the timer to ten minutes. He then opens his thermos and pours a cup of coffee, which he uses in the coming scenes as if it were a cocktail. He leaps up, suddenly transformed from the milquetoast bookkeeper to a commanding, flamboyant figure. He hits the hotel bell and sashays to the door, opening it and greeting an invisible guest.)

Louise, darling, *hello!* So good to see you! *(They "air kiss", Arliss filling the air with smooching sounds.)*

You're just in time. Everyone's here. The social kettle is on the boil! I expect it to start *shrieking* any minute now. I do love your hair... what

do you call that color? (*listens*) How wonderful and new! (*listens*)
Q'est-ce que c'est? (*listens*) I'm sure Randy will be along soon. Now let
me get you a drink. (*listens*) - no? Oh, come now, a champagne cocktail
at least, snookums (*listens*) - gin? (*listens*) Maybe a Manhattan? (*listens*)
Now, don't be silly; you *have* to have a drinky. You go mingle and I'll
have Dmitri fix you something.

(*Arliss gently pushes Louise towards the other guests and slides up to the
bar where an invisible Dmitri is tending bar.*)

(*confidentially*) Dmitri, gorgeous Dmitri, fix Miss Marshall one of those
things you fix. (*listens*) The one over there with hair ...that *obtuse* shade
of mahogany. Make it strong sweetums, but, whatever you do, don't let a
drop of it near her head or we'll all *die* from the fumes!

(*Arliss rings the hotel bell again and dashes to the door to greet the guest,
whom, of course, we cannot see.*)

Edwina! Come in, do! I have not seen you since Monte Carlo. At the
roulette wheel with that *dashing* young Italian sailor. I was green. I was
green! (*listens*) Excuse me, babycakes? (*listens*) No, Randy isn't here.
(*fumbling*) But I certainly expect an appearance to be put in. (*listens*) *This*
crowd? Randy will of course be here! He wouldn't *dare* miss this.
(*listens, then impatiently*) Who knows where he might be? You know
how Randy is...

Sweetie, have something to eat; you're much too thin! There's *gobs* and
gobs of lovely *mangeables*. Let me get you some pate (*listens*) - some
caviar, peut-être? (*listens*) I'll grill you a steak, girl, but eat *something*
darling. I can *barely* see you.

(*Someone in another part of the room gets Arliss's attention.*)

Yes, yes pumpkin, I see. Aren't *you* precious! (*to Edwina*) He is about as
witty as stainless steel. (*listens*) You don't know him? I'll have to
introduce you. He's a total boob, but has *tubs* and *tubs* of lovely money.
Oil. Texas, you know.

I was down there a couple of months ago. Absolutely *boring*... until... he
took me out on a tour of the oil fields. You would not believe it! There

was this ... rigger? Is that what it's called? Anyway, he was *stripped* to the waist and covered in slippery oil. I was agog! My heart started hippity-hopping and my head grew light. Oh, darling, it was so spiritual - and artistic; the chiaroscuro of the crude oil on this crude boy's torso - slathered... sleek... slithering tongues - buckles... buttons... sweet musky bouquet - uuunnnhhh! (*draws a deep breath*) Can't say more. Salacious details *will* follow. Needless to say I required two weeks in Bar Harbor to recover. Who can *rest* in the Hamptons anymore. Kept thinking Randy would arrive to soothe me.... (*Pause. Sigh.*) Oh well...

Anyway, I have the boy's number. Should you ever find yourself down Texas way... (*listens*) It's *therapy*, that's what it is. *Therapy*. Now come let me introduce you.

(*Arliss escorts Edwina downstage to meet with a group of other guests.*)

Harlan, I want you to meet Edwina Macon. Edwina, Harlan Quinn of Houston, Texas. I believe you know Louise.

(*Arliss runs to the desk, rings the bell, and runs back to the guests.*)

That must be Randy. You all talk. Harley, sugar, Edwina tells me she has developed *quite* an interest in oil.

(*Arliss goes to the door, eagerly hoping for Randy. It's someone else.*)

Dottie! I just *knew* it was you. Look, everybody; it's Dottie! (*Takes her by the invisible hand and goes to a corner away from the others.*)

Come over here, - I have got to talk to you. Have you seen Randy? (*listens*) Well, I have no idea. There is a *lovely* little invention called the telephone, you know, but do you think he would use it? (*listens*) Not a word. Oh, well.. (*sighs*) That is a new frock, isn't it! (*listens*) It's *divine*! Is that the *new* fabric? (*listens*) You've been to Paris without telling me! (*listens*) New York? (*listens*) Rodeo Drive, at the very least. (*listens*) No? I'm *sure* I saw it myself at Armani last week. I'll get it out of you yet. Now, what *are* you drinking? (*listens*) Oh, that's Dmitri, my new houseboy. Haven't you heard? (*listens*) Émigré. You know everything just fell apart over there. He needed a job, desperately.

(*calling after him*) Dmitri! A very dry martini for Miss D'Angelo, please. (*to Dottie*) He's very capable. (*listens, then defensively*) Of many things! (*listens*) Well... he can crack an egg with one hand; he can recite all the czars, *in order* - backwards and forwards; he can smile at me and make me happy... for a moment. Not like Randy, to be sure, but one takes what one can until the real thing arrives.

(*listens*) Over there? That's Edwina Macon. You don't recognize her? (*listens*) It's *tragic*, really. I'm afraid she's had financial difficulties. (*listens*) Well, look at her! Some bargain basement butcher got to her. No top flight surgeon would do that, not *even* to Edwina. I mean, she looks like Louise Rainer in *The Good Earth*, for God's sake. Last week we went to the theatre. *My treat*, of course. Wonderful orchestra seats... (*confidentially*) her *scars* were in the mezzanine! (*Arliss and Edwina laugh together.*) Go get a closer look at her - but don't you tell her I said that.

(*Arliss goes over next to Dmitri and sits in his chair.*) Oh, Dmitri. If you ever see me in fabric like that... just draw me a bath and hold my head under until I'm out of my misery. Baby, rub my shoulders a bit. (*long sigh*) Few know the strains of being an A-list hostess. Ohhhh, that's so good. You *had* to have studied somewhere. Sweden, wasn't it. (*listens*) Japan? (*listens*) California, and that's final. I *know* you did. I can tell you've had *scads* and *scads* of lovely training (*Arliss, eyes closed, starts to purr and coo.*) (*whispers*) Scads.

(*Arliss leaps up and looks across the room. Someone has started playing the piano. We don't hear it.*) You know that really needs to be tuned. I've been so busy.... (*listens*) You play beautifully, Louise. (*listens to Harlan*) Harley, this really is more of a *cocktail* party than a ball... (*listens*) I'm not the world's best dancer... (*Suddenly, he is swept of his feet and begins to dance - Harlan leading.*) I had *no* idea you were so graceful... (*They twirl a few times.*) Ooohh! How exciting! (*They dip.*) My word! (*They twirl again, and Arliss, standing next to the imaginary piano, flings out his arm. His face registers alarm.*)

(*stooping down to pick something up*) Oh, my goodness! Oh, no! Randy's picture. (*looks up to listen*) I don't care about the frame; the picture's scratched. (*listens*) No, Harlan, it's not your fault. Dmitri can get it... (*listens*) All right, if you must. It's in the pantry off the

kitchen... *(He stands, holding the picture with care)*. Please, continue with the party. *(listens)* I'll be fine. Just let me have a few minutes to myself. *(He goes back to sit near Dmitri.)*

Oh, Dmitri, what shall I do. *(looking at picture)* He's the only one that matters. They don't care. All these shallow, false relationships. *False* hair color, *false* eyelashes, *false* fingernails, *false* smiles, **false** hearts! And in one case, *false tits!* *(pause... regret)* ...Dmitri, listen to how hateful I am. I don't really mean it when I say those nasty things. They seem to say themselves... *(wipes away a tear)* Look at me. I'm being perfectly maudlin. Pour me a Stolli, cupcake.

(Arliss takes his drink and sips, looking around the room. He, and only he, sees Frances.)

Dmitri. Look at Frances sitting over there in the corner. I don't know what's happened to her. She looks so lonely. I know a little bit about loneliness. Go over and speak to her a bit. Cheer her up. *(calling after him)* But don't get *too* attached; I have plans for you this evening. *Back* breaking work.

(Watches as Dmitri goes to Frances.)

All alone. *(Long pause. Looks at picture longingly. Sighs.)* Oh, Randy. Where are you?

(The wind-up timer rings. Startled, Arliss looks at his watch. He swivels his chair around to his desk and is once again a shy bookkeeper, totting up things. The phone rings. Arliss is startled. He picks up the phone.)

(listens) Yes, Mr. Fry. I'll have it there in about five minutes. *(listens)* Yes, sir. Are you and Mrs. Fry going to the lake for the holiday?

(listens) How nice for you. *(listens)* Oh, me? Nothing really. Just a quiet weekend at home. *(pause)* Maybe have a few friends over.

CURTAIN