

At the Office

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“Wait here, sweetheart,” said Albert’s mother, “and I’ll be done in a minute. Just hang out and have some fun.” With that, she was gone.

There was a lot wrong with those two sentences. For one thing, Albert was too old for his mother to be calling him “sweetheart,” especially in public. For another, he knew it would take a lot longer than a minute for his mom to take care of the work she had to finish that night. It would take more than fifteen minutes. It could take as long as sixty or seventy of them. But most importantly, there was simply no way he would have fun. Not for sixty minutes. Not alone in mom’s office.

It was after six o’clock, and the whole building was empty, save for the security guard on the first floor. The floor where Mom worked was a long expanse of cubicles—tiny rooms with no ceilings, no doors, and walls made out of something that looked like carpet. It wasn’t a stretch to say that Albert felt like a mouse in a maze. The difference was that a mouse gets cheese once it makes its way through the maze. Albert didn’t have anything to look forward to but homework.

A few years earlier, he had relished these late-night trips to his mom’s office. The empty cubicles were like tiny forts, with crevices he could squeeze himself into while he read or drew pictures. He could recline in people’s chairs, pretend to talk on their phones, and leave silly notes on sticky paper for Mom’s coworkers. The empty office was a sprawling gray kingdom, and he was the king.

But those days were long gone. Now, Albert looked at the cubicles and just saw cubicles. The chairs were just chairs; the phones were phones. And the empty hallways, lit by flickering fluorescent light, were far from being secret passages. If he was honest with himself—and this was a hard thing to admit—the quiet office made him a little bit scared.

It didn’t help that he could hear a monster.

Again, this was something Albert was too old for. He knew there were no monsters in the office, just as there were no ghosts, zombies, or mad scientists. And yet—what else could be making that sound?

It came from far off. A deep-throated *whoosh*, mixed with an occasional grinding noise. He couldn’t help picturing some kind of ogre, with a big, round body and stubby little legs and a mouth the size of his mom’s compact car.

“And one eye,” he said to himself.

Definitely just one eye.

It was probably standing guard in front of the elevator, clomping back and forth to make sure that Albert and his mom never escaped the office. They could take the stairs, sure, but the monster probably had friends in there—vampire bats with pointy little teeth, or gnomes

who would hang upside down from the stairs and throw rocks at your head. And then they'd jump down on you and pull on your hair and—

"Little gnomes?" said Albert, interrupting his own train of thought. "Are you nuts?"

He needed to get a grip, and soon. The noise was getting closer.

He stood on the chair of the cubicle where he had been hiding. The cubicle walls stretched into the darkness. He climbed back down, not sure if he should hide, do some homework, or go searching for the noise. A rumble in his stomach made his decision for him. He couldn't sit still—he was hungry.

Sneaking one foot in front of the other, Albert crept down the line of cubicles, his heart in his throat. And just as he was nearing the corner at the end of the hallway—the corner that turned into the darkest part of the office—the *whoosh* stopped. Albert flattened himself against a filing cabinet. If there was a monster, it had gone silent.

He ducked under a desk, palms sweaty and heart racing. What had started as a sort of game had turned into real fear. He closed his eyes for what could have been a few seconds, or maybe ten minutes. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. He was too hungry to stay here all night. His stomach wouldn't let him. Finally, he peered out from under the desk. There was nothing there. Albert stood, his legs sore, and began walking again. And then he heard the sound coming from behind him.

"That's it!" he shouted. "This is unfair. You're sneaking around, and I don't like it. Just come and face me."

The sound stopped.

"Yeah! I know you're out there. Just step into the light and face me like a grown-up monster. I'm not scared."

He heard a little cough.

"Hello? Is there someone there?"

The monster was a woman.

"Yeah. My name is Albert. My mom works here!"

The monster stepped into the light: a middle-aged woman with a graying ponytail, wearing a sandy-colored uniform. "I work here, too," she said. "My name is Karen. Did you say something about a monster?"

"I was just goofing off."

"Maybe this was what you heard?" She reached into the shadows and pulled out a crazy-looking machine, with a long handle and big furry wheels. "It's a floor buffer. It polishes the floors."

"Oh. I figured that's what the sound was."

"Where's your mom?"

"In her office doing work."

"You bored?"

“Kinda.”

“Hungry?” Albert nodded. Karen jerked her head, as if to say: “Come with me.” So Albert did. They walked down the half-lit hallways, still creepy even though he was no longer alone, until they came to a big heavy door. Karen pulled out a huge ring of keys and unlocked the door. Inside was a kitchen. She took one key off her ring and handed it to him. “This’ll unlock the cabinets,” she said. “Eat up, kid.”

Karen left, and Albert opened the cabinets. Inside were all kinds of snacks: peanut butter crackers, jelly beans, apples, and cereal. He gorged himself, making a feast out of the office food. It was still dark in the hallway, but he found that it was impossible to be frightened and full at the same time.