THE WORKER

by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

MAN
WOMAN
THE MESSENGER

SETTING
An apartment.

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[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.

No!

WOMAN
Have you lost your mind?

MAN
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!

WOMAN
You don't mean that.

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!

I’m not going to argue with you.

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!

No.

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

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

Let go.

[Blocking the door.]

No! I won't let you!

Get out of my way.

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?

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?

Yes.

MAN
For the—

The child. Our child.

WOMAN

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!
Then what?

[Pause.]

What?

They were killed.

What?

They were murdered! Executed!

Murdered?

Yes! Put to death!

Who murdered them?

The company! Who do you think?

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?

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.

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.

WOMAN

Maybe they’ll go away.

MAN

What if it's something important?

WOMAN

Like what?

MAN

I don't know.

[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.
WALTER WYKES

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

You don't think so?!

I ... I don't—

[A sudden realization. Horrified, she covers her mouth.]

Who?! Who did you tell?!

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—

My god! She hates me! How could you—

I only mentioned it to make her jealous!

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.]

What are we going to do?

Nothing.

But—

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.]

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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