

Stanley

by R. Daniel Lester

The boxes arrived from around corners, from light places, from dark places, all on a mechanical belt that moved them throughout the warehouse like starved lab rats after the cheese. Sometimes the boxes came in a steady stream, and sometimes there were long gaps, the proverbial calm before the storm. Other times in such relentless fashion that the warehouse employees considered going a little mad, possibly gouging out their own eyes with an ergonomically structured mechanical pencil designed by a team of Swiss doctors, who could've been curing disease, but instead chose to tackle the mechanical pencil problem plaguing the business world.

In the boxes: office supplies of all colour and variety. Anything Joe and Jane Office could ever wish for. Things easily purchased at any office supply chain, but then that wasn't the point was it? The point was that these items were delivered directly to them, and they never had to get up off their latté-swilling, expense account asses. So they waited for the one blue pen with stylish casing and comfort grip. And they probably celebrated when it arrived too, unwrapping the box with nervous hands, eyes wide with anticipation.

Look, everybody, the pen is here! The pen is here!

And so, in the warehouse, the circle of life continued.

Pickers picked. Verifiers verified. Packers packed. Loaders loaded.

Orders filled no matter how deranged, or born out of caffeine-induced hysteria they seemed. Minimum wagers would toss the single package of finger pads into a lonely box and move on to the next order.

And the next.

And the next.

Because, regardless of the attitude of its workers, the warehouse breathed on, a gigantic beast whose appetite demanded trucks and trucks of food a day. Food that was consumed, digested, repackaged,

and shit out as even more trucks delivered magazine racks and permanent markers to needy businesses.

For some employees the job was simply a job, another day towards another paycheque towards another Friday night spent at the bar wondering just exactly when life decided to start with the kidney punches. For some it was the first rung on the ladder to bigger and better opportunities, and they approached the work with a rare, though out of place, vigour. For some, every ink cartridge picked was agony. For others, it was means to an end, one less order to go before the end of the night.

And then there was Stanley.

Stanley was neither a glass half-full nor glass half-empty kind of guy.

Stanley felt it was much easier to simply stare at the glass for a while and then wander away, complaining that if he drank the water he'd have to go to the bathroom in ten minutes anyway.

But everyone has to make choices no matter how allergic to them they are, so he'd usually opt for the negative, as he found it hard on the eyes to look at the bright side. Because often the crap was piled up so high one really had to climb to catch a glimpse of the sun. Instead, Stanley preferred to sit right in the middle of the crap and bitch about the fact that his clothes were getting dirty and the Laundromat close to his house had recently raised the price of a wash. And the dryer made a really irritating squeaking noise. And the soap machine ate his money two years ago.

So he sat in the lunchroom, complaining about the rain.

And he stood at the loading dock, complaining that he was stuck inside a warehouse on a beautiful day.

He was a master of "the gripe," a Ph.D. in the study of negativity, his A+ thesis paper entitled, "Shit Falls Down: A Life Spent In the Basement Suite."

But he wasn't a bad guy. In fact, quite the contrary. It's simply that Stanley was Stanley, something that was fine by him, even if no one else thought so.

Stanley was a square peg in a round world, which is exactly the reason he never told anyone when he found the severed finger in the box of pencil sharpeners on a slow Tuesday afternoon.

Or maybe Stanley didn't tell anybody about the finger because it would've required effort. He'd have to walk all the way to the office on the other side of the building to tell the shift supervisor. Then the shift supervisor would tell the operations manager. Then the operations manager would call the police. Then the police would ask questions and give him forms to fill out. Then Stanley might have to go to court as a witness. And the courthouse was all the way downtown. Plus, the lawyers would probably want him to buy a new pair of pants.

Stanley realized it was easier to simply place the plastic business card holder in the box with the pencil sharpeners (along with one finger, minus hand) and send it along the line. Wait for someone else, one of the verifiers maybe, to let out a scream and call for help. He'd walk over to see what the hubbub was about and be suitably shocked to see a human finger in a box of office supplies. That way and it's some other poor sap who has to buy a new pair of pants to testify in.

But the scream never came.

And neither did the frantic call for help.

Nothing happened.

The circle of life continued, a finger on its merry way to an unsuspecting customer. Surely, thought Stanley, they would call and complain? Phone customer service, demanding to know what type of operation the company thought they were running. And like complaints always do, it would weave its way along the chain of command, dodging corner-officed alpha males, skipping over cubicled clock watchers, eventually finding a home on the bottom floor, the warehouse.

Because, like Stanley said in his thesis paper, Shit falls down.

But that call never came either.

And soon Stanley began to wonder if he'd seen the finger at all. Perhaps it was tired eyes. Or job stress. Maybe it was a practical

joke, and when Stanley didn't bite, the pranksters moved on to greener pastures.

Whatever the explanation, the finger played less and less on his mind.

That is, until he saw the thumb nestled between the bag of elastics and the three-ring binder. He almost didn't see it, though. As he placed a desk calendar in the box, a pink of flesh caught his eye, one that had once been opposable to four other fingers. A shiver ran down his spine. Stanley understood that fingers and thumbs don't typically fall off on their own accord. Someone in the warehouse was slicing, dicing, disposing of a body (bodies?) in pieces and segments. Someone he knew was testing the "a whole is worth more than the sum of its parts" theory in a human experiment gone horribly wrong. Or they were a plain old psychopath and well deserving of a tight fitting jacket with a lifetime supply of appropriately placed electrodes.

But Stanley hadn't seen any psychopaths.

No ogres or demons walked the halls. No one looked like the cross of Charles Manson and Jeffrey Dalmer that would have to be responsible for such atrocity. No one drooled constantly, or seemed victim to violent seizures that threw them into murderous rage.

The faces were the same he'd seen for years.

The same scowls. The same half-smiles.

The same blank faces that resulted from working 44 hours a week in a place that ate good moods for breakfast. Where concrete floors and racks upon racks of fluorescent sunshine sucked life out of all who dared enter.

And as he stared at the thumb, boxes piling up behind him, he understood he'd lost his window of opportunity. Gone were the days Stanley could innocently meander to the shift supervisor and inform him of the Body Part Disposal Program currently underway. Talk of the thumb would inevitably lead to talk of his first discovery which would lead to words like "job safety," "human decency" and "personal responsibility." What Stanley definitely didn't need was a WPR (Work Performance Review) where the new operations

manager would communicate with empathetic looks and corporate speak he learned in a two-day weekend seminar. All the while filling out a form that would squirm its way into Stanley's permanent record. All the while tapping his gold Junior College football championship ring against the table edge in an accidental rhythm that's very purpose was to draw attention to the ideals the ring stood for: sacrifice, determination, team work. And the million other buzz words written on a portable blackboard in a hotel conference room where the sign on the door said, "How To Motivate Those Beneath You."

And since the thought of being a guinea pig for an exercise in corporate training made Stanley want to puke, he did the only thing that made sense: absolutely nothing.

He placed the vinyl-coated paper clips next to the desk calendar next to the three-ring binder next to the thumb next to the bag of elastics and went on to the next order.

And the next.

And the next.

Waiting for panicked shout. Waiting for terrified scream. But again, they never came. Which was obviously to the psychopath's liking because soon all manor of lopped-off tissue and bone began to appear as the BPDP really got into full swing.

He saw a big toe in a box of calculators.

He saw a left ear beside a mouse pad.

He saw a decorative pencil cup with a kind of amputated arm motif.

But all in all, he thought the pen-style sponge moisteners with remaining fingers and toes arranged in order of size was the most artistic display. Even the glint of gold on the one finger fit in with the artistic vision that Stanley thought the psycho was going for.

Glint of gold?

Stanley reached in and twisted the ring around, already knowing that it stood for Hard Work.

For Excellence. For Perseverance.

Actually, he hadn't seen the operations manager recently. No one had. The man's neatly ordered desk was garnering its fair share of dust. He hadn't cornered anybody to give them his "101 Steps To Job Satisfaction" speech in quite a few days. Warehouse gossip had him either splitting town over gambling debts or requiring a long hospital stay after the combination of a mail tube and a teddy bear hamster went horribly wrong.

Certainly he wasn't the test case in the BPDP.

Or was he?

Two hours later Stanley got his answer when the boxed head of the operations manager, neatly severed at the base of the neck, lips locked in snarled rigor mortis, stared up between several cartons of self-adhesive commercial-sized envelopes.

This place is going to kill me, Stanley said to himself.

So then he did the only thing that made sense: he ran, fast, never to be seen crossing the warehouse threshold again. Dropping a pair of expanding files, Stanley bolted for the exit as if Olympic gold was on the line. Even in a life spent avoiding decisions like the plague, one eventually had to be made.

As, inside the warehouse, despite the distractions caused by Stanley's rather dramatic screaming exit from the premises, the circle of life went on.

Pickers picked.

Verifiers verified.

Packers packed.

Loaders loaded.

Stanley was replaced.

A new operations manager was hired.

And a salesman from the second floor took an extended leave of absence. Apparently.

