

The Errand

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Jeremy was told to run an errand. His boss had asked him, would he go to the governmental office to validate “some paperwork”, please. Jeremy said yes, he could go. He would be given a day off, and he estimated the errand would last no more than an hour, so he was basically given a whole day to himself. His boss smiled and presented him with a rather thin, plain manila envelope, saying that he was to deliver this on the eight floor. Jeremy nodded. Eight floor. Piece of cake.

He woke up early, at eight o'clock sharp. He ate a beautifully burnt piece of toast and downed it with a steamy, energizing cup of coffee. After getting dressed, Jeremy took his keys and left the cosy little nest that was his home.

At the bus stop it's where all truly began. Jeremy was staring down at the street, while he queued up, his headphones at full volume. His head moved slowly back and forth and his foot tapped the pavement in sync with the music that was blaring in his ears. His mother always picked on him about that, how he would be deaf by the time he was thirty, thirty-five at best. Of course, he did not listen to her, or rather, he *could not* listen to her, as he was always plugged in. They were quite big, big enough to cover his ears. Oh, he was so ashamed of them! He always tried to hide them as best he could. He had also kept his hair long until he started working at the company, though apparently, that was against “company rules”. Jeremy needed the money, and it was not like he had many options, so he had cut it short, exposing his gargantuan ears to the world.

The bus came. Jeremy's hands were blissfully empty, so he paid the toll while gripping one of the handrails. He sat down, his fingers tapping his thighs, rhythmically. A frown appeared on his brow. Yes, he had taken the right bus, and yes, he had his keys and phone on him. He had not left his wallet behind, either. He was doing nothing wrong. There was nothing out of place. Nothi-

The envelope!

As though he were the leading actor of an action movie, Jeremy shot upwards, dashed toward the exit door and, when it opened, darted out, landing clumsily on the pavement. He flashed back to his apartment, snatched the envelope, and leapt on the next bus before the doors closed, gasping for breath.

The second bus ride was far from enchanting, to say the least. Business-people and students were packed in the metal contraption, and a baby was howling his lungs out, his mother enthralled with her cell phone and her ears plugged, leaving her annoying sack of meat for the others to deal with.

Jeremy got off two stops too late, due to the difficulties he found in worming his way towards the bus exit. However, as soon as his feet touched solid ground, he could see his destination. A tall, taller-than-eight-floor square building loomed up like an ominous tower before him. It was as though dark, thunderous clouds were circling its peak, concealing it,

* 2º premio del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría cuento (2016).

obscuring the facade even more. As Jeremy approached the entrance, he noticed people carrying hefty piles of printed paper and envelopes and, surprisingly, their wallets. Why they would carry their wallets in their hands, in broad daylight, for everyone to see intrigued him. He shrugged that thought off and entered the building, landing into the first enemy's lair: the reception hall.

The reception hall was of a grey, faded blue and had the smell of generic detergent and crushed dreams. Jeremy greeted the un-uniformed available person at the desk and politely asked her who he should see to have those documents validated. He could not finish the sentence. The receptionist, not even favouring him with the quickest of glances, took a form from a pile beside her and bluntly slid it towards him. Jeremy did not understand. "Fill in that form," she said, "and go to the first floor." But he had to go to the eight floor, he said. She said it did not matter. "Fill in that form and go to the first floor." Not even once did she turn her eyes away from the computer screen. Jeremy decided to comply. He took the paper and stepped aside to fill it in. Three more people were sharing his fate while he was busy completing his own A-54 Form. When he was done, he walked into the lift and pressed the button corresponding to the first floor. His companions pushed their own buttons, until the whole panel was lit. Maybe the lift had one person too many in it, which made Jeremy turn to religion, for a change.

The lift climbed to the first floor, and the doors slid open. An 'excuse me' here and there, and he was out before they could close again. The greyish blue from the reception seemed to have chased him there.

"Excuse me," Jeremy interrupted a small, wise-looking elderly woman who had her own envelope, though much bulkier and on the verge of tearing apart. "But could you please tell me where I should go with this?" The woman looked from him to the A-54.

"Oh," she lamented, placing a hand on her chest, as though she felt sorry for him. "You won't get anywhere with the A-54, love." Then, like a shrew fox, she looked sideways as if she was making sure nobody was looking at her. She handed him three blank forms. "Go to the fourth floor and tell them that 'it's already in progress'."

Jeremy frowned. What was she talking about?

"What?" He uttered.

"Fill them in and live, love," without another word, the woman turned around and walked down the stairs, supporting her body against the shaky railing.

B-03, D-19, and A-62. Those were the forms that the mysterious old lady had given him. Using the envelope as a makeshift clipboard, he completed three forms and on to the fourth floor he went.

The fourth floor was in a much worse state than the reception hall: blinking fluorescent lamps dangerously hanging from the ceilings, which had yellowish blots here and there and, in some parts, a pitch black hole into the unknown, staring back at the floor-dwellers. The carpet was uncomfortably sticky and ripped, and most of the chairs – not counting the ones for employees – lacked a back-rest. There were about a dozen booths where one could be assisted, but only three were being manned and

womanned. A bored and tired queue extended out of the office, and Jeremy asked the man at the end of it how long he had been there. One hour, he answered.

Two hours. Three hours went by. When the fourth was approaching, Jeremy started to despair. Were they doing this on purpose? One of the public servants went 'out for a smoke' at one moment and came back an hour and a half later. One of the men wore his hair as long as the eye could see. Oh, how Jeremy wished that it could be his. So much hair to cover his elephant-sized ears. That thought made him conscious of that feature and he willed his hair to grow faster, but to no use, of course. When the clock announced the fourth hour and Jeremy's stomach began to growl, his turn to be assisted came. He sat before a man with receding hair, thick glasses and soulless eyes. He demanded the D-19 Form, which was promptly provided. He also demanded the A-62 and the A-54, and Jeremy produced them out of the envelope. He scoffed when his eyes lay on the latter. It was not certified, he said. Where is the certification, he asked. Jeremy swallowed, hard.

"I-It's already on progress," he muttered, afraid for his own life, afraid that he would have to start over. The man stared back at him with empty eyes, his mouth slightly ajar. Before he could speak, a woman who was passing by rested a hand over the man's shoulder. A hand with ring-covered fingers and bracelet-filled wrists. The metallic-looking hand belonged to a woman past her prime, with cheaply-dyed hair, and reeking of a perfume that made the nose itch.

The woman was a floor boss, or so the plaque pinned on her blouse said. She would handle him, she said, and took over the booth. She savoured the back of her swivel chair and crossed her legs, the tip of her deceptively-smart shoes colliding with Jeremy's legs.

"I think I heard you say that the certification was 'in progress'," she quoted. Her malicious aura, her hatred of people actually advancing on the bureaucratic system and completing whatever they had come to do, all of that was perceived, and Jeremy knew it was the end. He would have to start over. "Well? You've got the form to prove that, I guess?" Her eyes squinted, gloating and basking on her superiority. "Do you?"

Jeremy's ears, and his whole face, blushed. He could see her fiendish eyes staring in amusement at his red ears. Was she mocking him? Was she having the time of her life by mocking him and his inability to fight back, lest he really wanted to lose all his chances to get anything done ever again? He could not stand her, but Jeremy had no choice. He needed to find a way to the eight floor.

While darkness was embracing him, overcome with despair and terror drowning him, a dim but hopeful light shone. It came from the envelope. Fill them in and live, love...

"As a matter of fact, I do," Mustering all his courage, he whipped out the B-03 form out and slammed it on the desk. The woman's smile vanished. She mouthed the word 'impossible', and looked back and forth from the form to Jeremy, wondering how the hell he had gotten a hold of one of those. Evil had been defeated, and Jeremy came out of the office with certified forms, a

smile of self-satisfaction and a standing – there were few chairs to sit on as it was – ovation from the never-ending queue.

The battle on the upper floors went on, waging epic fights against the laziest and most twisted public servants that ever existed, until he reached the fabled eight floor almost at closing time – three o'clock. A boorish man stamped the papers Jeremy needed stamping in three seconds. He was free, finally, gloriously free. And hungry, so very painfully hungry. He feasted like a king after slaying the foulest of beasts or the greatest army, and that night he slept soundly and uninterrupted.

The next day, Jeremy went to his boss' office. They shook hands amiably and he delivered the envelope.

"Oh!" his boss exclaimed. 'Good work, Jeremy.' 'Excellent work.' 'I think this deserves a raise, don't you think?' Those words rushed through Jeremy's mind as he sat expectantly. "Thank you for bothering, old chap, but it turns out that we don't even need those papers! At least it wasn't that difficult an errand, was it?"

After hearing that confession, Jeremy silently fainted, crushed by the ordeal of the previous day.