

Ever Decreasing Circles

"Talking Heads" Monologue for A-Level English

By Robert M.J. Morris

[Marion is a middle-aged woman who works in a senior position at an NHS Hospital. She is seated beside her desk, on which sits a computer displaying an error message.]

I asked him what he meant. He said, "It's a virus, love, computers get 'em all the time." Well, of course I told him to stop being ridiculous. The only person around here who catches any disease is Veronica, and that's only because she's sleeping with every consultant from here to X-ray. For one thing, I said, this office is so hot at this time of year, no-one could catch any form of virus. It's hard enough for us to get through the heat barrier first thing in the morning let alone a tiny little germ. It's a wonder there isn't a large sweating pile of bacterium hyperventilating by the door.

In winter, of course, it's another matter. The hospital shuts down our heating in the winter due to the enormous drain on resources of the extra patients. It seems to have escaped the Board that most of these patients are departmental staff dying of hypothermia. They never listen, though. Most of them don't work here half the time. The Board of Governors is almost entirely made up of New Labour gurus, one of them naturally indispensable due to his vast experience running oilrigs.

I have this saying: in the great cesspit of life, scum always rises to the surface. And even if you don't find it funny – Gerry says it's far too laboured – you've got to admit it's true.

Actually, he may have been punning. He does that.

I suppose governments are a good example; the PM's a kind of lid. The only visible part of a thing buried out of view, trying to stop the smell getting up people's noses. If something goes wrong, you get a new lid. And if the new lid fails, then you change the cesspit. Only, of course, to discover that the new cesspit doesn't let smells get upwards and irritate you, it leaks downwards, polluting your flowerbed and making you wish you hadn't filled in the acceptance form.

[She smiles proudly.]

We're in charge of administration. 'Records must be kept' is our motto. I don't run it single-handedly, well not on paper anyway. The fact is that Veronica isn't much use after a night out with a consultant, and Gerry's boyfriend's run off another woman, so he's not much use to anyone except as a doorstep. I tried to console him, telling him he should try a girlfriend, but he wouldn't have that. 'I can't stand women,' he said. I think I must have looked offended because he quickly pointed out that he doesn't think of me as a woman. That's all right then, I said. But I wasn't sure.

So we're supposed to make sure everything runs smoothly with the minimum of paperwork, and that everything is fully documented. It'd be alright apart from the 'Economy Drives.' The last time we had

one, we had to take on extra staff in order to investigate how we could cut back. Then we couldn't sack the extra staff once the work had been done. Something about a clause in the contracts we used.

The board were furious. Personnel called it an 'Administrative Error,' whereas since it was a dispute over hiring and firing, we blamed it all on them. The upshot of it all was that an enquiry was launched and we had so much work to do we couldn't carry out the proposals. Course, now the crisis is over, we've got to lose the proposals, so I'm just putting them in the internal mail. It'll have been up to Edinburgh, via Kings, by the time it gets back to me. By which time we'll have a new board anyway.

Administration isn't as easy as it might first appear. Trouble is, we seem to spend half our time trying to keep up enough administration to warrant our being here. Each department's got this wild notion that it's the centre of the universe. The battle for staff and equipment makes the corridors seem like the front lines. Only the canteen is neutral ground, but that's only because the catering department aren't allowed out from behind the counter.

And frankly, the situation is not helped by Veronica's sexual activities. She alone can set consultants at each other's throats, all of them arguing about who she's involved with. The only good thing to come out of her carryings on is the demand for treatment at the Clap Clinic. The statistics look great. We've won an award.

I suppose from a practical point of view I can see why departments aren't keen on letting each other know what's going on. I mean, if they don't know what you're doing, they don't know what you're doing wrong. We have to constantly fight to make them send paperwork to each other, and send copies to us. We still don't get enough, mind you. The number of old files in circulation round here is phenomenal.

[She stops, suddenly worried.]

I hope no-one comes to inspect what we actually do. It could be rather awkward. I don't particularly want to have to explain that Gerry is not freely perspiring on the computer due to the complexity of an important document but because of the difficulty of level five of "Mortal Ninja Badger Busters." I haven't the heart to tell him I completed it while he was out last week. He'd only ask for his disks back, and I hadn't finished installing some new game when my computer crashed.

[She looks outside the window]

We're supposed to be smartening up our public image after we opted for trust status. We've got new buildings going up, all very smart and clean, until of course they start to be used; which we can't

afford to do, seeing as they cost so much to build. The new teaching centre has got marvellous lecture facilities, the latest in computer diagnostic packages - but no students. They still haven't got round to renovating the front entrance yet, even though it's been talked about for months.

It's a shame, really. Nothing ever seems to get done round here.