

The Hall
by Tracy Mullinax

John sat at his desk in office 6B, typing on his computer. This was what John did every day. It was his job. He typed what his computer told him to type and nothing else. John knew the routine well. Do not stop working, obey the computer, and never, ever, leave the office except to go home at day's end. These were the rules. John obeyed the rules and he was happy.

But one day as John was typing, his computer shut down. He was perplexed. This had never happened before. He waited for it to turn back on. He waited and waited. But nothing happened. After an hour, John decided he had been waiting long enough. Perhaps it was day's end and he had simply lost track. This seemed to be the most plausible explanation, so he put his coat on, pushed his chair in, and walked over to the door and pulled it open.

John stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. He began walking. John looked at all the labeled doors. 7A, 8L, 4D, and numerous others. This must be where his co-workers work. Where were they? An uncomfortable silence filled his head. John couldn't remember any co-workers. He had to have some, he reasoned. John stepped to the nearest door and knocked. No answer. "Strange," he thought. Everyone must have gone home. He needed to go home as well. But where did he live? John could not remember where he lived. He reached the end of the hall. A sign pointed back the way he had come, "Subjects A-M."

"What the...?" John felt a dead weight pulling from the back of his eyes down into the pit of his stomach. Was he just a test subject for someone else? "No," he thought, "This is my work, not some lab experiment."

John felt a momentary sense of ease, only to have it erased by a disturbing question that would not let go. What was his job? What did all that typing on the computer really do for anyone? "Am I being tested? Who is testing me?" He felt confused, perhaps for the first time in his life. Confusion was as alien to John as joy and sadness.

John began to sense that he was being observed. There were three halls in front of him. He resisted going straight ahead. Somehow, John knew that whoever was testing him wanted him to go straight ahead. For some reason, he did not want to listen to them. He chose the hall on the right. John continued walking.

"Where do I work?" He thought back to office 6B. "Where do I live?" His thoughts

returned to 6B. "Where did I grow up?" He could not get 6B out of his head. Was this his whole life? His only life? Office 6B? John had never remembered hating anything in his life, or feeling much of anything, for that matter. But he hated this thought more than anything he could imagine.

In the very next moment, the hatred was replaced by a shocking emptiness. He missed his office. He missed his desk and chair. He especially missed his computer. "No," he struggled to reclaim his own thoughts. "That's what they want me to think." Whoever they might be.

His mind continued to race. They want him to miss his office, his chair, his desk, and especially his computer. They want him to miss the life he had; the life he was now in the process of escaping. They did not want him to have his own life, whatever that meant.

John continued walking down the hall, wondering if it would come to an end. It did. He came to a door and opened it without hesitating. There were stairs. John paused. Had he ever used stairs before? Where would these stairs lead him? Was this really the right way to go? It had to be. Somehow he knew it. John walked downstairs, now more certain of his decision than he had been of anything in his inconsequential life. He walked down several flights, checking each door, but all of them were locked tight. After 7 floors, he discovered an unlocked door. There, before him, was yet another hall. This one was longer than all of the rest.

John walked down the hall. It had no end in sight. Questions began to creep into his mind with each additional step. What is happening here? Who is making this happen? What do they want from me? John had never felt so alone. John had never actually felt alone, until now.

His journey down the hall continued for what seemed an hour or more. "Is this a dream?" John wondered. John had never remembered having a dream before. He finally reached a door. "Employee #6B" it read. That was him. This door was made for him to go through. How could this be? He was trying to leave.

"Wait," John thought, "no, no, no!" he screamed as he realized. This was a test in itself. They, whoever they were, wanted him here, they made him leave his office. They made him have these realizations, go downstairs, and walk these halls. Everything that John thought had been his decisions, weren't really his at all. He was still following the computer, one way, or another.

He put his hand on the door handle but hesitated to open it. John's eyes watered. Who was testing him? Who was doing this? Where was he? Who was he?

John pushed the door open. The room was dark, with just enough light to illuminate two buttons in the middle of the room. The buttons were labeled. "Remember and Leave" and "Forget and Stay". The choice was completely his.

John panicked. What kind of place was this? The obvious choice was to leave. Was that really what he wanted to do? After all, before this, he was happy in 6B. And yet, he yearned to know. The indecision was disturbing. John began circling the tiny room. What is happening? Why was he here? Would knowing truly help him? The walls seemed to close in on John as he continued to pace. Why did the final decision have to be his? He needed to learn. He needed the comfort of staying. Leave or stay? Leave or stay? He pressed a button.

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