



ILLUSTRATION BY NICK HOWLETT

By Reno Nevada

ETHEL her cross-eyed typing

Ethel sat, sipping absent-mindedly from her coffee, waiting for the office clerks to give her more letters. She was a typist in a pool. Ethel couldn't type, on account of her cross-eyed condition. The clerks in the office rarely gave her work, disturbed by the word salads she tossed back on their desks afterwards.

Cross-eyed Ethel received a few letters on her desk each morning for typing. Letters that should have read something like:

Dear Sir,

We wish to advise that your weekly compensation payments are now currently under review. Please present yourself to the company doctor at 10.00am on the 15th September. Failure to attend may result in the termination of your compensation payments.

Yours Sincerely

The Five Star Insurance Company.

would turn out as,

Dream Sid,

We, your weekly compensators, wish to advise you that payment is as imminent as a blue sky. Never present yourself naked to an unaccompanied doctor, for fear of termination. Failure is a payment we make to compensate for our lives.

Yours Sincerely

The Lonely Star Insurance Company.

The clerks rarely gave Ethel work to type, and what they did give her was usually thrown away. Old Boothy, rubbing his belly and playing with his tie, would saunter from her desk to his with a letter she'd just freshly carved from the machine. He often tossed letters in the bin once out of Ethel's sight, winking toward the clerks as they huddled in the corner, busily plotting new and elaborate schemes for arranging overtime. The mail girls on the front counter smoked relentlessly, leaving lipstick scars on their butts as they sliced open envelopes and traded office gossip. The office boys read the newspaper on the toilet, dreaming of the day of liberation from the menial tasks given to them by the older, sterner men of the office. Nobby White, one of the most feared and lazy of the senior clerks, spent most of his day arranging an appropriate spot to meet the big-buttocked mail girl, Rhonda, during their tea break. When White's wife rang she was told that he was in a meeting, which of course, was nearly the truth.

They, the bosses, made it clearly known (via their minions) that Ethel's presence was a tolerable fact in an intolerable world. The instructions were clear, though never spoken: give Ethel as little work as possible, but give her enough to make her feel like she's contributing. Whilst all the other typists were churning out anywhere between fifty to one hundred letters a day, Ethel did five at the most. And of course, not many made it out of the office.

Ethel's desk drawers contained hidden wonders. Glasses of apricot jam were kept where the p52s were supposed to live. Her subscription to *Aviators' Monthly* piled up beneath the z80s, breeding a strange confluence of aeronautical jargon and form letters advising people of their need to attend medical examinations.

A bunch of grapes went off in her bottom left hand drawer. One of the bosses removed them

“You know I’ll tell you something about Ethel that nobody else here knows.” He paused, turning his head suspiciously back and forth...

one afternoon after she went home, replacing them with a fresh bunch.

Lunch for Ethel was three cheese sandwiches on white bread whilst seated on a swivel chair in the ladies’ toilets. The other women avoided the toilet at lunch-time.

Dear Sod,

Given that you are in a state of constant compensation, we wish to advise that you are no longer in receipt of payments. If you have any queries with regard to this decision, do not hesitate to call us your doctor.

Yours Sincerely

The Lone Star Insurance Company.

Ethel’s letters stood as a monument to the forces of inefficiency and benevolence at work in the public service. She was one amongst many misfits taking pleasure in the *vin ordinaire* of the work ethic. Day after day she typed letters that made little or no sense at all. Her letters confused and bewildered compensation recipients across Sydney. They paid visits to the lonely and the infirmed, the tired and disused, to the disfigured and the insane. They were often read beside a letterbox, where a face would crease and wrinkle under the weight of Ethel’s fanciful, misguided prose.

Dear Madam,

The lives of the anonymous are upon you. Please ensure that you attend the meeting with Doctor Bloch on the 17th September, 1999. Failure to do so may render us apart.

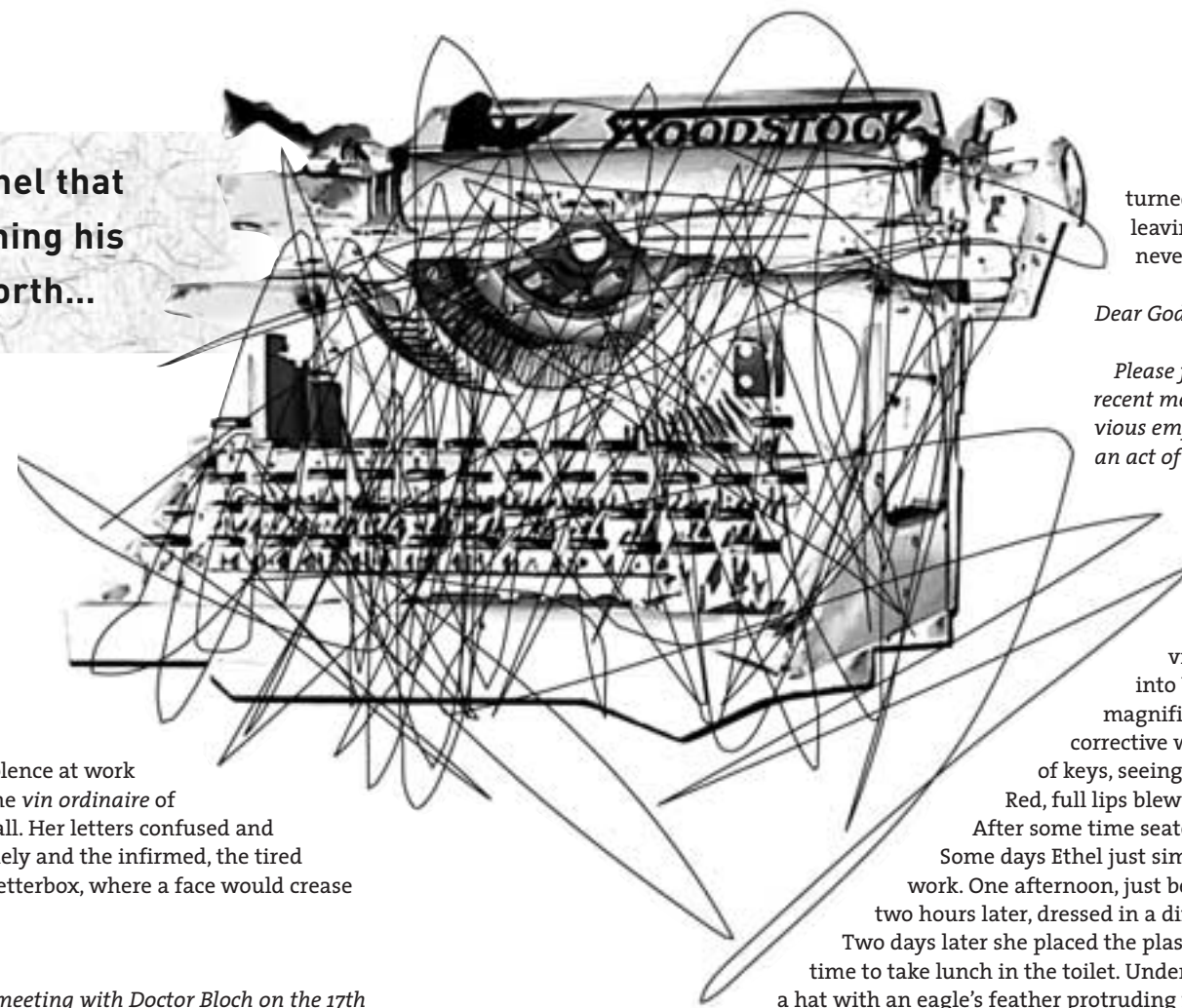
Yours Faithfully

The Loaded Czar Insurance Company.

Ethel wore green dresses on Monday, the purple spotted blouse on Wednesday, and the beige skirt on Friday. On Tuesday she took her lunch break at 12.30pm, on Thursday she went at 1.00pm. Ethel’s routinary work existence drew sidelong glances and derisory giggles from other members of staff. But what most people failed to realize was that Ethel’s behaviour spoke as much about us as it did about her. We revelled in the spectacle of Ethel’s repetitions, but were ashamed to admit that her banal routines helped us through the boredom of our own work regime. Ethel, the shining star of our frustrations, told us about our own minute place in the order of things.

One of the longest serving clerks, Neil Linton, had known Ethel for fifteen years. He leant across my desk one morning on his way back from the Cafe bar, and told me a story.

“You know I’ll tell you something about Ethel that nobody else here knows.” He paused, turning his head suspiciously back and forth, scouting for spies. “One Christmas we had the staff party here after work. Ethel never stayed around for work drinks, but for some reason she decided to hang around. Someone in the office handed her a drink, then another, and so on, as you do at work parties. After a while she’s taking it easy, sharing a laugh with a couple of the girls from the front desk, when one of the bosses from the seventh floor comes up to her. By this stage everyone’s as pissed as parrots, carrying on, not really taking too much notice about who’s talking with whom, but not me. I keep watching him, how he’s hovering around her like a fly over a rotting carcass. He’s trying to be smooth, angling for a bit of extra-marital sex, turning the sleeze on full bore. There’s a look on his face that says, ‘Hey Ethel, I’m such a suave bastard, how can you resist’, and all the while he’s slowly backing her away into the far corner of the office, moving in for the kill. Everyone’s running around with party hats falling off their heads, talking shit and making plans for the rest of the evening. Suddenly he’s got her up against the window and he leans across and whispers something in her ear. Without a trace of inhibition Ethel steps back from him, pulls up her dress, and pulls down her panties. She just stands there with this innocent look on her face thinking that he meant right then and there. You should have seen the look on his face! He



turned and ran off in the direction of another drunken gathering, leaving Ethel standing there with her dress up over her waist. She’s never been to another work drinks since. Keep it under your hat boy!”

Dear God,

Please find enclosed your final compensation payment. In light of your recent medical, it has been decided that you are now fit to return to your previous employment. Failure to return to your place of work will be noted as an act of impropriety, and we may be forced to take legal action.

Yours Sincerely

The Malvern Star Insurance Company

Her workload dropped off to a dribble. One or two letters kept Ethel and her liquid paper busy all day. Because of her visual affliction, even the application of correction fluid threw her into Van Gogh-like reveries. She leaned into the cluttered keys, her eyes magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses, and applied the creamy corrective with angel-like daintiness. She lived circles of joy at the crunching of keys, seeing in this minor tragedy a chance to apply the corrective to an error.

Red, full lips blew trade winds of forgiveness to drying pools of liquid paper.

After some time seated opposite her, I noticed that the letters dropped off all together.

Some days Ethel just simply disappeared from the monotonous confines of our place of work. One afternoon, just before tea break, Ethel got up and left her desk. She came back over two hours later, dressed in a different blouse and sporting cherry lipstick.

Two days later she placed the plastic cover on her typewriter around 9.30am, and returned just in time to take lunch in the toilet. Under her arm was a delicately wrapped package and on her head was a hat with an eagle’s feather protruding from its side.

One day I followed her as she got up from her desk and headed toward the lift. I kept a steady distance behind her, taking the stairs down while she took the lift. Cross-eyed Ethel left the building, dodging pedestrians with a graceful, cross-eyed kind of awkwardness. Her green dress caught the breeze, parading the modest thighs of a spinster. She inspected things that others seemed to miss. She stopped to pick up a newspaper clipping off the ground and put it in her purse. She paused outside a shop and smelt the window pane, sniffing away until a shop assistant arrived, nervously asking her to move along. She rummaged through a garbage bin and pulled out a child’s broken toy, a miniature car with busted wheels. She sat down on the pavement and pushed it back and forth, making screeching sounds with her voice.

Ethel went into three perfume shops, two department stores, and one sports store. Each time she emerged with a delicately wrapped memento. After a while I could smell the dazzling trail left in her wake from twenty feet away.

Turning the corner of York and Kippax streets I began to panic. I had been following her for over an hour, and wondered how my absence would be tolerated. There would be questions when I returned, and given I was at the very bottom of the public service, lying was my only way out.

Ethel’s willowy frame disappeared suddenly in a flotilla of business-suited men. I brushed my way through them just in time to see her ascend. Her dress billowing, her arms outstretched, and the parcels under her arms now tiny flapping birds, she spiraled away into the air like a plastic bag caught in a windstorm. Her scent hung there for a moment, then it too was gone. I hurried back to the office, only to find that Ethel had made it back before me. I didn’t follow her the next day, or ever after for that matter. She was soon transferred to the motor vehicle claims division, and I to life insurance.

Dear Ris,

Further to your letter dated, 17 June, 1549, we wish to advise that compensation is suspended until the keys to my heart are returned to this office. Failure to follow these instructions may lead me to believe that you are unfit, and I shall be forced to take my love elsewhere. Our company doctors have compensated for your failure, and wish to advise that you are poor, and they are rich. Love grows on trees, and hides beneath the armpits of the flying and the confused. Happy Easter.

Yours sincerely

The False Start Insurance Company. ■