

MFA

THESIS

NOVEL

IAN M. ROGERS

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Phillip "Flip" Montcalm is a writer, artist, poet, and occasional musician who went to a small northeastern liberal arts college you probably haven't heard of. He doesn't have any awesome awards or publications yet, but when he does, they're gonna rock your socks.

An Office with a View

a novel by Flip Montcalm

In the evenings I fall victim to a dull foreboding that immobilizes me in my bed, fearful that if I go to sleep I'll have to wake up again and face the void. I feel the same auguries of near-certain doom in the mornings when I lay with my eyes shut not wanting to get up, and in the daytime I feel listless and am prone to pulsating headaches centered around my nasal cavity. People who know me refer to me using words like *detached*, *morose*, *oversensitive*, and *tense*, and I scare easily when I see someone I'm not expecting approach from around a corner. When I'm forced to confront people in power I often stutter and feel unsure of what I know to be true, and I worry what few remnants of dignity I have left are being extinguished one after the other. It astounds and disgusts me that my life has turned out this way because I never thought it would when I was younger. After all, I work in an office.

My job would be infinitely more bearable if it wasn't for the work environment, which forces my coworkers to act in a stiffly unnatural manner when they interact with others (especially me). The work I do itself is not so egregiously awful (just repetitive, pointless, and boring). I might even consider it pleasant if I could do it alone in my room at my parents' house or at one of those cool, progressive West-Coast startups I hear about where the break rooms have foosball tables and employees are entitled to free snacks and massages (sometimes, I imagine, at the same time).

I don't, however, think anyone in my office plays foosball or would ever get a massage during work hours even if one was available—they're under enormous pressure to maintain a strict aura of professionalism so their superiors will think highly of them and give them promotions, even though there are very

few promotions to be had now. I've worked here long enough to qualify for a promotion (or at least a raise greater than my 0.8% annual inflation allowance), though because of the segregated nature of our office hierarchy, there don't seem to be any higher positions I'd be qualified for even if someone were to leave or suddenly die. In the unlikely event I were to be promoted (perhaps because someone left or suddenly died) and no longer had to process the never-ending onslaught of orders, payments, cancellations, and cable TV bundle renewals that comes across my desk every day, I'm sure my new job wouldn't be much better. I'm hounded by my awareness that I'm an insignificant part of this company and thus deserving of my current four-and-a-half-by-five-foot work cube (big enough for only my desk and a single chair), though if I were to ever stop processing the never-ending onslaught of orders, payments, cancellations, and cable TV bundle renewals that comes across my desk every day the company would simply lay me off (no one here is ever fired) and bring in someone fresh out of college who's willing to work for less.

The office complex where I work is located beside a parking lot off of an interstate surrounded by dense woods, though I can't see the dense woods from my desk because my cube doesn't have a window. (It's out of fashion now to say *cubicle*, since that word implies that the people inside the cubicles are slaves to their jobs, and people who are slaves to their jobs don't like being reminded of this.) My cube is situated in the corner of a square of other, larger work cubes across from an office inhabited by an older man who leaves his door open and is prone to sudden clearings of his throat (har-UMMPH!). Adjacent to his office is that of a middle-aged woman who seems predisposed against ever saying more than three words to me; our one attempt at conversation occurred during my first few weeks at the company (back when I was still trying to make friends) as she emerged from her office carrying a Tupperware container filled with pasta salad made from tri-color rotini and cherry tomatoes:

Me (*cheerfully*): Headed to lunch?

Her: (*dismissively*): Yes.

Me (*embarrassed*): Have a good one then.

Have a good one. People need stock responses to survive interactions where actual conversation has been replaced by pre-assembled phrases that convey the appearance of interest (“Doing anything fun this weekend?” “No, not much.”).

I'm unsure whether people realize this, though it's the best explanation for why so few conversations of substance occur in my workplace—several of my coworkers are avid *America's Got Talent* viewers, and I suspect it's because it gives them something to talk about.

Since there are so few younger people here, most of my coworkers begin what few conversations we do have by asking me where I went to college and what I studied, though when I tell them I double-majored in sculpture and electronic music they tend to pause awkwardly before changing the subject. As a result I've begun bringing a book to read on my lunch breaks.

If I were to stay at this job (which I'll have to if I can't find a better one) I wonder whether I'd eventually become a shallow, passionless, and slightly overweight thirty-something like my coworkers, incapable of any thought more substantial than a complaint about local zoning laws, with my abilities to think critically and creatively withering away until there's nothing left but—

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“WHEN WE’RE young writers,” the balding, middle-aged assistant professor said from his place at the classroom’s front table, “we all think we can change the world and write something that’s never been seen before.” He paused to give his audience time to consider that maybe—just maybe—such boldness could yield effective results before continuing. “But this is just a fantasy we cling to when we haven’t yet found our writing voices.”

Flip’s attention had mounted tremulously at this statement and he now sat upright in a state of nervousness tinged with surprise.

“I would agree,” said Kendall, the sallow-cheeked student with the rimless glasses and polo shirt sitting at the other end of the table. “I’d say what this novel is suffering most from is an intense aversion to plot, with no real conflict to hook the reader’s interest. What we have instead reads like an arrangement of the main character’s thoughts, and while they tell us a lot about who we’re dealing with, they never give me any incentive to keep reading.”

Hearing his last two years of work dismissed so carelessly made Flip cringe while also balling his hands into fists under the table. Besides Kendall (who’d spoken with the same all-knowing smugness that had sparked Flip’s dislike for him) and the professor (whose name was William Stark, though Flip was still uncertain whether to call him *William* or *Will* as he’d done with his undergrad teachers or to use the more formal *Doctor* or *Professor* he’d imagined were standard at midwestern universities. Since he didn’t know for sure it seemed safer not to call him anything, though in his own mind, he referred to him as *Stark* for lack of a clearer solution) there were five other grad students sitting around the ring

of tables. Between Flip and Stark sat Jackson, a lanky, relaxed individual who'd said little beyond his perfunctory introduction during their first workshop meeting and who'd said even less when Flip had tried talking to him at the English Department mixer the previous weekend. On Flip's right sat Craig, who wore all black despite the heat outside the air-conditioned English building and whose notebook pages were covered in inked spirals and lightning bolts. Beside Craig sat Melvin, whose evenly trimmed hair shone with carefully applied product, then Lawrence, whose vacant eyes wandered glossily around the classroom out of either curiosity or boredom. The final workshop member, Brad, sat straight up in his chair between Stark and Kendall, his fist thrust under his chin in strict attention and a hearty, open-mouthed smile stretched across his face. There were—as Stark had pointed out with nervous laughter during their first meeting—no women in the writing workshop, nor would any of the participants have been justified in checking anything other than Caucasian on their grad school applications.

Stark nodded very slowly in response to Kendall's point, his eyes focused on a space just beneath the ceiling-mounted projector. "Yes," he said, drawing out the word. "I think you've hit on something crucial." He moved to the whiteboard, where he uncapped a dry-erase marker and began writing as a stifling silence enveloped the room:

CONFLICT → PROBLEM → TENSION → PLOT

"As Kendall mentioned," Stark continued, "all novels start with an initial conflict that triggers a larger problem, which in turn leads to tension and creates plot. It's the plot that drives us to keep reading to see how the problem will be resolved."

Flip sensed that he'd done something abhorrently wrong but sat waiting for the best time to address it.

Stark glanced briefly down at his notebook. "What Philli-er, Flip's novel seems to be doing is instead assembling a lot of

details—mostly the main character’s thoughts, but also a lot of,” he paused, fumbling for the appropriate word, “*episodic* scenes that don’t quite create a plot because they aren’t linked to a progression of events.”

“But there’s plenty of conflict there,” Flip announced, his words resounding with the same firmness he felt about the novel, “because we know the protagonist is miserable at his job and we’re wondering what he’s going to do about it.”

This statement caused the other students to look at him for the first time. Lawrence’s eyes slid awkwardly toward him and then away while Brad maintained oddly direct eye contact and nodded more vigorously than necessary. It was Kendall, though, who actually spoke. “I got that,” he said as if this should have been obvious. “Very easily, actually, since it’s clear that this guy—at least I assume it’s a guy—doesn’t like whatever he actually *does* at this office job of his. What’s not clear to me is, first, where the novel’s going, and second, why I’m supposed to care. There’s plenty of people out there who hate their jobs, so I’m not sure what makes this guy so special.”

Though the second of these comments struck him with its possible truth, Flip felt well-equipped to argue with the first. “Oh, it’s definitely going somewhere,” he protested. “We know the narrator doesn’t like being trapped in a claustrophobic work cube, so that’s why when the corner cube with the window view opens up in chapter six he tries to get it for himself as an arbitrary prize. Having an actual window is less important to him than achieving some sort of victory in the hopeless work environment.”

In contrast to Flip’s earlier interruption this explanation drove everyone (except Jackson, who still wore an expression of dull detachment) to glance down hesitantly at their clipped packets, with Melvin and Brad turning forward several chapters. Stark, too, looked down and resumed his seat at the front of the ring of tables. Amidst the paper shuffling Flip could hear the steady ticks of the wall clock.

After some seconds Lawrence aimed his blank stare out the window with his brow furrowed as he began to speak. “It’s inter-

esting that you say the problem of the new office happens in chapter eight,” he said in his languorous southern drawl, “because I also wasn’t seeing the importance of that as a turning point. I’m thinking that might be a little late to hook your readers, so instead you’re going to want to start with a more pressing problem to draw them in right away.” His childlike eyes lit up. “What’s that term, the Greek one for starting in the middle of the story, at the moment of conflict, that in medium, or in mediation—”

The tone and speed Kendall used to interject was more arrogant than helpful. “*In medias res.*”

“That’s the one!” Lawrence agreed. “I really think this novel would benefit by starting *in medias res* with that new office thing so we’d know right away what the book is about.”

“I was thinking that too,” Kendall said firmly. “Especially since the opening pages felt so disorganized. If we started with an immediate conflict between the narrator and whatever it is he’s up against, we wouldn’t need all that back story because we’d be getting to know the narrator through his actions.”

“That,” Melvin said, “and literary agents are always looking for attention-grabbing openings, so when they read your first page and can’t tell where the novel’s going they’re just going to move on to the next email in their inbox.”

Flip wanted to speak again and explain that starting with the new office scene would be impossible because readers needed to feel the anguish and despair of the working world before the new office appeared as a beacon of hope, but as he thought about the best way to say this he heard a distinct but low tapping of a fingernail on the table next to him. The fingernail belonged to Jackson, who still sat with his chin resting on his palm as his tapping finger indicated the words scrawled in the margin of his notebook:

Don't talk during workshop. Sucks, eh?

The pause was broken by Craig, who smashed his fist against the table while jerking his right leg up and down like he was working

a sewing machine pedal. “I’m definitely all for starting with the action—we want to have the most things happen in the shortest amount of time so we’ll keep reading, like doing a line of coke, but with your book. That’s how coke works—it makes you want more, like, right away, but you’re the cocaine dealer in this case because you have to give us more throughout the book little by little so we can get our fix. If you keep promising more then we’ll keep coming back until your book’s finished, and then BAM!—you hit us with a slam-crash ending so we’ll want to buy your next book.” He waved a hand casually toward the ceiling. “If you can’t do that then readers are gonna go find another coke dealer.”

“That’s a clever way of putting it,” Melvin said. He spoke in a business-like tone as he studied the room around him. “If you’re looking for some good examples of attention-grabbing openings you might try Dwayne Furlough’s *Turpitude* or Bernard Callahugh’s collection *I Know the Truth I See*, since all those stories open with really strong conflicts.”

“Or anything in Ashton Krantz’s *Acreage of the Bedeviled*,” Kendall said. “There are a lot of succinct opening lines there that draw you in to keep reading.”

Flip hadn’t heard of any of these books but had attempted to copy down a snippet of each title to google later. He looked back at Jackson’s message as he wrote.

“My advice,” Brad said, addressing the room for the first time, “is to scrap the whole office-with-a-view idea. I see where you’re going with the Oscar Wilde reference, but you really need a more substantial focal point that leaves your character taking action instead of acting passively. I mean, who wants to read a novel where the main character gets stuck listening to a bunch of arrogant know-it-alls telling him what to do?”

“I’m glad you brought that up,” Stark said. “If we’re all clear on Phil—Flip’s starting immediately at the point of conflict, does anyone have any thoughts on how he could give his main character a more active role?”

Once again, it was Kendall who answered first. “To be frank, I think Phil’s novel would benefit from having his character do just

about anything, since there doesn't seem to be much tension in his office at all. Instead we start off with this mass of characters all at once, making it impossible to keep track of them all and causing us to get confused."

"Yes," Stark said with a nod. "Instead of throwing out all the characters in one long opening scene, focusing on the main character's interactions with each of them individually would help us get to know them better, especially if you did it in separate chapters."

"I also feel like what we're reading is more a piece of something else," Lawrence said in his slow drawl. "Like the framework for a story without the story itself, or like the writer's just getting to know the character but doesn't know what he wants him to do, if that makes sense?" He extended the question as if afraid someone would cut him off, then stopped without saying anything else.

"It does," Brad said with an almost regal air of authority. "There's nothing about this character that makes me care about him. Not only is he not facing any real conflict, but he comes from a privileged middle-class family, he's college-educated, has a full-time job, and doesn't seem to be under much financial pressure—at one point he even mentions that he's almost saved up enough to move out of his parents' house." He allowed a pause, reminiscent of the one Stark had used to open the discussion, to let this sink in. "That shows me that he feels entitled, and he thinks his problems are the biggest ones out there. I found myself thinking that if this guy hates his job so much, why doesn't he just find a new one?"

Lawrence leaned forward. "I kept thinking that too! If he's that unhappy, why doesn't he just quit?"

Because there aren't any other fucking jobs he can get! Flip wanted to scream but didn't, sitting instead with his head slightly downward and Jackson's note not to talk peeking at him from the spiral notebook. Because it was hard enough for him to get this job, because he doesn't have money to move to a bigger city, and because he has five student loans and a shitty car! It's not his fault no one wants to hire young liberal arts grads when they can hire an empty-headed dude-bro from the suburbs who slept through an economics major but picked up a bunch of internship experience! If I didn't

have to spend all those summers working back at home I could have found some amazing opportunities that would have led to better things. Upon finishing this thought Flip realized he wasn't sure what opportunities he could have found or what kinds of things they'd have led to, but he felt certain they must have been there somewhere.

"The financial angle's good though," Craig said with his leg still rocking up and down. "It works because his lack of money adds tension. Maybe this guy isn't getting ready to move out of his parents' house—maybe he isn't saving money at all because he's charging a bunch of stuff on his credit cards. Maybe he's shelling out money for his internet porn habit or he just bought a speedboat and now he's got to figure out a way to pay for it. Maybe the repo men are coming to take the boat away, or maybe they already took it and now he can't impress this girl he promised to take on a romantic weekend to his uncle's friend's lake house. Maybe he's so strapped that he's got to rob the office or kidnap his boss's daughter for the ransom money while she's walking home from school. Maybe the book *starts* with the kidnapping, but then it goes bad when he has to deal with his boss's loud-mouthed preteen daughter who wants to post the whole thing on her Instagram story—and there's your book right there!"

Lawrence's eyes brightened at this. "I like that! You could even split the kidnapping scene into a short story to send to journals for some extra publishing cred on your CV."

"It's true, man," Craig said. "Publishing a shit ton of short stories in prestigious journals nobody reads is the best way to establish yourself as a writer."

And Melvin said, "I don't necessarily think this book needs an underage kidnapping, but I do think Craig's on to something with the money angle. You might consider how characters react when they're in desperate financial straits, like in Robert MacKenzie's *Shadows of the Tracks*, where the family's been passed up for jobs in the steel mills and has to work minimum-wage jobs to survive. That's the book that really helped me understand what it's like to be poor."

And Brad said, “Also, where are all your female characters? I only counted about two women in the whole thing. Writing a book with lots of women is key to showing agents you care about diversity, and it’ll help you win over the female market.”

And Kendall, who always seemed to have something to say, said, “I also found the sentences far too long and overloaded with adjectives, so you really need to trim your paragraphs down. All the text messages and handwritten notes also felt like cheap gimmicks to get my attention.”

And Stark nodded at this and said thoughtfully, “It’s best to be careful with that kind of experimental stuff, since it can make your book feel disorganized.”

And Jackson, the message still peeking out from his notebook and his chin still resting in his palm, sat without having said a word.

Flip looked at his watch. There were fifty-three minutes to go.