

# THE MALE SECRETARY

## By Bradley Walton

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**CAST: One MALE.**

**AT RISE: The MALE, dressed professionally, on a bare stage.**

MALE:

The lady inside the restaurant door smiles uncomfortably and tries not to look at me as if I've got squirrels for eyebrows. She is unsuccessful.

"The Harrisville City Schools secretarial party, you say?" There is a polite strain in her voice. It might as well be the Andromeda Strain, for all the effort those six words appear to cost her. Her cheeks begin to flush, and if her face was a toilet, the tank would already be half empty.

"Yes. The administrative professionals group," I reply.

She tries not to look like she's studying me as if I were the answer to most of the questions on a final exam scrawled in sand with an alien pizza sauce, but her eyes break from mine, ever so slightly, darting to my lips, ears, and hair, making sure her brain didn't somehow incorrectly process my appearance. She wants to look at my feet and make sure I'm not wearing heels—I can tell from the way her head is twitching—but she fights off the impulse and escorts me to a room at the back of the restaurant.

As I walk through the doorway, I am aware of a restrained vibrancy that permeates the space; dozens of smiling women are conversing over water, coffee, and iced tea. Then, as the occupants begin to register my presence, the soft waves of polite chatter haltingly drop off and die as if rudely shoved one by one over an unwelcome precipice of "why is there a man in this room?"

I find my name written on a note card at an unoccupied chair, and I sit. The eyes of the women in the adjacent seats dart around the room, looking for empty spaces to which they already know they cannot flee for fear of seeming impolite.

To my left, an office secretary from one of the middle schools makes a valiant effort to engage me in conversation. She says something about the weather, then about the furniture in her office. I smile and nod my head. Despite her bright-eyed cheeriness, it's as if she has never met a man before, although seeing as how she's wearing a wedding ring and is at least six months pregnant, this is clearly not the case. To be fair, the issue is not just that I am a man. It's that I am a male secretary. While men are plentiful, I am of such an incredibly rare subspecies that I might as well be a gold-plated, winged cross-breed of giant panda, manatee, and unicorn. Most days, it's not an issue. I work in the library of a high school. Everyone mistakenly assumes or pretends that I'm a librarian and I don't bother to correct them.

But on Administrative Professionals Day, there's no getting around the facts. I'm a secretary. And I'm a guy. Every year, the school system pays for a nice luncheon for all of its secretaries. Everyone arrives at the restaurant and has a lovely time. Then I show up and spoil everything. Despite the façade of civility, I am clearly unwelcome. For years, this bothered me. But I finally decided that if my Y chromosome is really such an imposition, the rest of me might as well play along. Gender equality is a two-way street. If one side of the road is blocked, the least I can do is vandalize the traffic cones.

To my right, the financial secretary from the main office examines her coffee mug with such intense scrutiny that she appears to have discovered a new life form.

"They have such lovely mugs here," I say. "If I was a gang member, I'd steal one and show it off to my homies."

Her eyes dart up at me, then back to the mug. She laughs uncomfortably.

"I guess we're sort of like a gang here. A secretarial gang. We should steal these mugs so we can clink them together in a display of solidarity. It'd be just like a gang handshake, only with coffee mugs. We can all carry them out in our purses, except for me. I don't have a purse. I really need to break down and get a man bag. Listen, do you think you could steal a coffee mug for me?"

The poor woman scoots her chair away from me, but we're packed in tightly together, so she doesn't get far. Contemplating a strategic retreat to the restroom, she asks, "Don't you think the restaurant would miss all these mugs?"

"Nah. If we took every mug in the room, they'd assume they didn't give us any in the first place. And even if they did catch us, they couldn't throw us in jail. The school system would grind to a halt."

She looks completely flummoxed. Once upon a time, I would have wondered if she was stupid, but I have learned over the years that this is the sort of effect that I have on people at these gatherings. I'm about to let her off the hook and say I was kidding when she tells me, "I don't have any space in my purse. Too much stuff."

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