

The First Two Pages: “The Rescue” by Scott Adlerberg

From *Lockdown: Stories of Crime, Terror, and Hope During a Pandemic*,
edited by Nick Kolakowski and Steve Weddle (Lightspeed Books)

An Essay by Scott Adlerberg

I answered with a quick yes when asked whether I wanted to contribute a story to the anthology *Lockdown: Stories of Crime, Terror, and Hope During a Pandemic*. Editors Nick Kolakowski and Steve Weddle said that 100% of the proceeds from sales would go to the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, to help booksellers and independent bookstores during the COVID-19 crisis, and they set down the collection’s basic guidelines. They wanted stories taking place against a background of national lockdown. No planes would be flying and people’s movement would be limited due to an illness that is flu-like but mutates rapidly. Within that framework, the contributors had wide leeway to pursue, as the editors put it, their “horror/suspense/noir ideas,” and we could write about the lockdown just as it was beginning or after everything in our fictional world had been shut down for a while. Plenty of space, in other words, for the writers to use their imaginations.

The call for the stories went out in March, when New York City, where I live, was the epicenter for the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown was in full swing, and the city, its streets deserted, all establishments closed except those deemed essential by

the state's governor, felt like a metropolis of ghosts. I work for a city agency, and about a week earlier, the word had come down to most city workers, myself included, to take what we needed from the office and begin teleworking. As directed, I had done that. With everything going on around me and the city in its suspended state, did I need to invent much to tell a tale about a lockdown? I had my setting; I just needed a plot. One came to me quickly, suggested by something having to do with my work environment, and with about five days to go before the deadline to turn in the story, I started "The Rescue".

It begins with a paragraph of two lines which, you could say, function as a prologue:

The bureaucracy never rests, and neither do those who guard it.
Here's what I mean:

These lines indicate that the story, somehow, will involve government and red tape, and I was hoping to throw the reader slightly off balance. The reader comes expecting plague and death and societal collapse, and here we have a narrator talking about the permanence of bureaucracy. Only after that set-up do I get into the specifics of the world the virus has struck.

The virus had been spreading and killing for three or four weeks when the commissioner gave the telework order to our agency. Everyone considered non-essential to the agency's operations would, until further notice, be doing their job from home. Since our agency is the one that collects taxes and fees for New York, you better believe

that most every employee working for it is essential, but what the commissioner meant is that everyone who could conceivably work at home would do it that way. Needed for that: a personal computer, not much else. We'd be given remote access to the agency data systems we used all the time. There'd been talk over the last fortnight that telework was coming, but the actual implementation of it happened fast. We came in for business as normal Monday, and the commissioner sent out his agency-wide decree via email late that morning. Tomorrow, on Tuesday, we were not to come in, and our lives as public servants who could work with a laptop in bed, wearing pajamas, would begin.

In a word, I have opted to go the way of "realism." Everything described in this paragraph matches my experience with getting an abrupt telework order at my real-world agency, and I wanted more than anything to capture the odd quality of that day. For everyone in that office, for millions of people, this sudden retreat to quarantine had to be a first-time experience. You had to think fast. You were on edge. But at the same time, you needed to keep a clear head to ensure a smooth transition to a different mode of working. That's what most of the third paragraph conveys, as the narrator, despite the pressure and discombobulation, attempts to maintain his focus and complete the tasks he needs to get done.

That final afternoon was hectic. I transferred necessary files to a Zip drive, gathered papers and notes. *Is there anything I'm forgetting?* I kept thinking, because I didn't know when I'd be able to return to my office. They might lock up the municipal building until the virus danger passed. Or they might allow in commissioners and division heads and upper-echelon people like that and prevent entrance to regular staff and the midlevel managers like me. Plus, since I am in charge of fifteen people, I had to hold a meeting with those reporting to me and lay out a plan for how we would function as a unit from our homes.

He notes that “Nobody sounded upset to be going under lockdown, not with the virus on the upswing, ravaging the city, the death toll increasing daily,” but points out concerns the employees have “about working under quarantine.”

Again, for this part, I did little more than transcribe comments I heard expressed by people in my unit on evacuation day:

“My computer is old and slow.”
“If Citytime doesn’t work, can we do our timesheets manually?”
“Hope this doesn’t last too long. My wife and I together all day...”

The narrator seems to be organized, to have everything together. He clocks out late in the evening because of everything he has to do. But could he have forgotten anything in his office? When he gets home, it hits him:

...and not until I was in my apartment, sitting on the couch having dinner, the TV on across the room, did I think about the one thing I’d left behind that I should have taken with me—my plant. Somehow, unfathomably, I’d forgotten it. I’d overlooked it because of the day’s craziness, the thousand little things I had to arrange and remember. Fuck!

People like and care for their plants, but I’m hoping the reader will wonder why precisely he is so upset over leaving behind his Guiana chestnut. True, nobody knows how long the telework situation will last—“maybe weeks, perhaps months”—and a prolonged absence from the office will mean the little money tree’s

death. But plants can be replaced, after all. And in the context of a pandemic, where humans are sick and dying, getting distraught over the possible loss of a plant may seem like an overreaction. Still, the narrator is dead serious, and he lets us know he will have to correct his oversight: “If I didn’t retrieve my plant soon, it would die, and I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

Okay, now the reader knows the stakes for the narrator, but what is behind the man’s resolve?

He gives us a hint, and if that hint seems slightly vague, that is intentional on my part:

The plant meant too much to me. It connected me to what I could not give up. I saw Octavia, my wife, watching me with her arched-eyebrow doubtful expression, and I said to myself I couldn’t let her down.

“I won’t disappoint you,” I said. “I’ll get the plant.”

He does tell us that his wife bought him the plant and asks her to stop looking at him with skepticism. She appears disinclined to believe his promise that he will return to his office to bring the plant home. Why the plant has such significance in the life he has with Octavia is a question that gets answered at the story’s conclusion, but at this point, after two pages, I hope the reader is asking themselves what is going on between these two that so much would hinge on the rescue of a

plant. At the same time, the mission is set. There is one goal. Now the story will concern itself with the narrator's attempt to achieve that goal.

One last thing: the opening line of "The Rescue," about the bureaucracy never resting, may make the reader think I am referring to the narrator. And in part, to judge by the man's determination to get back the plant he feels he needs, I am in fact referring to him. But as the story goes on, the reader will also see that bureaucracy doesn't rest even when dealing with those who belong to it, like the narrator himself.

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Scott Adlerberg is the author of four books. They include *Graveyard Love* (2016), a psychological thriller that takes place in the dead of winter in upstate New York, and *Jack Waters* (2018), a story of revenge and revolution on a Caribbean island in the early twentieth century. He has contributed short stories to a number of anthologies, and he writes essays and reviews regularly for *Crime Reads*, *Mystery Tribune*, and *Criminal Element*. He lives in Brooklyn.