

Civility Place

Breakfast is last night's leftovers.

You leave your plate in the sink and splash water over it. You brush your teeth. You rub gel between your palms, work it through your hair, and use a comb to arrange a neat side part. You cut Friday's dry-cleaning tags off your suit. You straighten your tie. You pick up your bag, sling it over your shoulder and walk to the train station.

Thirty seconds after you arrive on the platform and walk to the point where you know the first door of the first carriage will open, the train arrives.

You're on your way to work.

The entrance to the tower comprises six revolving glass doors. Their action reminds you of hand-cranked egg beaters, or one of those spy films where the hero is stuck in a tunnel in his battered suit, pitted against wind and gravity and tonnes of water that are bearing down on him and forcing him closer and closer to a giant fan with rotating blades.

You can feel the egg-beater fans sucking you in.

Whump, whump, whump.

You look up for a second at the tower looming above you. It's so tall that you can't see where it stops and the sky begins.

You steel yourself and walk in, preparing to be served as suggested – beaten or chopped.

On the front desk in the foyer stands, as usual, an extravagant floral arrangement. Today it's an immense concoction of birds of paradise.

'Welcome to Civility Place,' grins the concierge, who is standing to one side of the flowers.

'Hi, Serge.'

As usual, you stop to ask after his motorcycle.

He once showed it off to you at the end of his shift. As it gleamed in the artificial light of the car park, he told you how he often took it on holidays up the coast to a little shack that looked out over the ocean, and how he was planning to ride it overseas one day – maybe around Japan.

Serge smiles when you enquire after the bike's health. He says it is well. He is, however, thinking of selling the bike. He wants one that's just a bit shinier and louder. The head of the tower's security team has hinted to him that a promotion might be on the cards if Serge continues to demonstrate outstanding commitment to his role. A promotion would give him some extra cash for a new machine.

'Wow, that's great,' you say.

'Thanks, I reckon it's almost in the bag,' says Serge. He nods to others passing by. 'Welcome to Civility Place,' he says, giving them the friendly grin of recognition you had thought was reserved for you alone.

The lift greets you good morning in a recorded female voice, smooth and mature.

Beth from Banking steps in and greets you too. She has a voice similar to the recorded female voice. You wonder if she could simultaneously be a lawyer in your building and the smooth-voiced woman trapped in the walls of the lift.

You are close enough to Beth from Banking to be able to smell her shampoo and whatever expensive scent she has on. As you inhale, you look at her pearl earrings and down at the spikes of her patent black heels, which have those red undersides you noticed once in a training seminar when she crossed her legs and arranged her impossibly straight chestnut hair.

Beth from Banking is a woman made for this building.
The glass of this place is in her DNA.

The lift zooms into the sky.

They say these lifts are the fastest in the country. They're not as fast as they used to be, though. Rumour has it that they had to be slowed down because some chump couldn't cope with the speed and threw up all over the lift buttons.

The entire building, including the lifts, is made of glass. The internal walls are glass, the conference tables are glass, and the desks, doors and shelves are glass.

Even the floors and ceilings are made of glass, and there is an unspoken but unpoliced rule that one must never look up the skirts of the women on the floors above.

You've been told that a middle-aged woman was once found wedged in one of the glass ceilings, her legs hanging down into the lower floor, still in motion as if walking, and

the top half of her engrossed in flicking through a file. She licked the tip of her index finger intermittently as she read, unaware of the consternation surrounding her. No one knew how she got there, and the resulting rescue services bill was enormous.

As you are taken up to Level 403, you see the surrounding city. All roads lead to this tower, and all the buildings look as if they were forced to part to accommodate this monolith as it erupted from the ground.

The lift announces your level and you step out. As levels go, it's not a very prestigious one. Your team has a reputation for bringing in less money than others, hence its relegation to this floor, where a view of the outside world is only possible when the whole level isn't engulfed by clouds.

They say that on Level 1200, at the very top of Civility Place, one is able to dictate letters to clients while looking across into the infinite blue and down onto rolling carpets of clouds as if one is God. No one you've spoken to has ever been to Level 1200 but they all suggest that to arrive at that point in your career, you would have to have parted ways with your soul.

You walk through the automatic sliding doors and past the kitchen. Two secretaries are discussing hypo-allergenic varieties of lip balm while hovering over the daily fruit box. You excuse yourself, reaching between them to take a banana.

This would never happen on the higher levels. You don't know what it's like on Level 1200, but you've heard that on Level 1199 the secretaries never utter a word. They don't

even arch their eyebrows so as not to cause any disturbances to the flow of the rarefied air.

The day at work begins like any other. Perhaps the air conditioning has been set one or two degrees colder than usual, but otherwise everything is normal.

You settle into your death chair. You call it this because – although it’s handsome and designer – it will eventually kill you: first by weakening your spine and then by rolling its five vengeful chrome wheels in starfish formation over your vital organs.

You start up your computer and open your inbox.

A query from a prospective client awaits you, as well as thirteen replies from existing clients concerning urgent matters. There’s a joke email about metaphorical flying hippos, forwarded to you by a friend you’ve been trying to shake. Another chain email appears, courtesy of your aunt, which describes the wonders of a Mayan superfood that can make your hair sprout faster in all the right places and reduce your risk of oesophageal cancer by 43.8 per cent.

You open the firm’s time and billing software.

You’ve already wasted one six-minute unit of billable time imagining a giant hippo falling from the sky onto your unwanted friend, and another two units wondering how the Mayan superfood is able to distinguish between right and wrong places for aggressive hair growth.

You record these three units of time to Office Administration and forward the prospective client’s email to your secretary, Mona, asking for a conflict check.

You want to focus like you usually do but somehow you can't. You stare at your computer screen and nothing registers. The words begin to float and rearrange themselves.

Through the multiple glass walls that separate you from the outer offices, you watch two window cleaners hanging in harnesses on the outside of the building, drawing squeegees across the windows. They can't see you – the tower's exterior is all mirrors. It's so high up that they're breathing oxygen from tanks on their backs. The wind is strong and the cleaners swing like pendulums, sometimes smacking right into the building with loud thuds. No one in the outer offices seems to notice them.

Mona knocks on your door, handing you a file you need.

'Shocking working conditions,' you mutter. 'Shouldn't they be on some sort of scaffold?'

'What?' she says, then follows your line of sight to the window cleaners. 'Oh, they'll be right – they're foreigners. They probably come from some place with super-huge mountains. Plus, where they're from, they're probably used to getting smacked around.'

'That's outrageous,' you say.

You don't like Mona. She's only been working for you for a couple of weeks. She's the replacement for your old secretary, who accidentally suffocated last month in a room full of files. The firm has since toyed with the idea of transitioning to a paperless office, partly to prevent further losses of human resources.

'It's not outrageous,' says Mona, crossing her arms. 'You're just being politico correct, or whatever.'

You turn back to your computer screen and hear one of the cleaners crash again into the glass.

‘I tell you what’s outrageous,’ Mona adds. ‘It takes them a whole year to clean this building.’

You’ve heard this before – that once the window cleaners get to the top, they begin again at the bottom, after being allowed to break for two hours on Christmas Day to carve a turkey and wear ill-fitting paper crowns liberated from shiny red-and-green crackers.

One of the emails in your inbox is an urgent follow-up query from a client who is a national distributor of fruit juices.

You don’t care about the juice company. Its CEO is upset that another juice company is using a logo of an ugly orange cow with bad teeth, which he believes is deceptively similar to his company’s logo of an ugly purple cow with bad teeth.

The slogan at the bottom of his sign-off is: *Everything you could have asked for, and more.*

You don’t understand how this slogan can be true in any respect. It’s not even real juice this company sells. It’s cordial, basically, with a barely qualifying squeeze of third-rate fruit.

You open a new email window.

Dear Mr Laing, you type. *Your cow needs a dentist.*

You stare at the screen and yawn so much that tears run down your cheeks. You hold down the delete key until the window is blank.

You call Haline’s extension.

‘Coffee?’

‘See you in the foyer. Give me five.’

You watch the time in the corner of your computer screen. One minute. Two. Three. Four.

You grab your jacket and walk to the lifts.

Today at the cafe underneath the tower, the barista is the bearded one with the eyebrow ring. The quality of this guy’s coffee depends on his mood, and he’s looking grumpy this morning.

Haline looks over her shoulder to check who’s in the line.

‘Everywhere I go in the city,’ she says to you in a low voice, ‘I see this fucking tower. I can’t escape it.’

‘Well, it *is* twelve hundred storeys high.’

‘With a frigging spike on top of that.’

‘You could just not look at the skyline.’

Haline squints. ‘You know,’ she says, ‘I closed the curtains last night to get away from it. Then I turned on the TV and it was in the opening credits of that shit spin-off, you know, where that cartoon pen draws the skyline? It took a whole four seconds to finish the spike. I could’ve thrown the TV through the window and jumped out after it.’

‘You’re not going to jump out any window,’ you say. ‘Right?’

‘I’ve worked it out,’ says Haline, handing exact change to the girl behind the counter. ‘If you factor in the extraordinary amounts of time we spend at this place, we’re being paid six dollars an hour and we’re being charged out at three hundred. By the collective sweat of our junior white

collars, we are paying for Phillips Tom's boathouse and his third wife's fake boobs and his sons' private school educations and his extended family's annual A-reserve opera subscriptions.'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'God knows. It could be too late to leave. Plus I don't know if I have it in me. They hire masochists like us for a reason.'

'I don't think I could find another job,' you say, taking your flat white and nodding to the scowling barista. 'The longer I do this, the more specialised I become. So far, all that my professional skill set amounts to is an unparalleled knack for spotting similarities between pictures of cows.'

'Speaking of jumping out windows,' Haline murmurs, 'remember Windy?'

'Who could forget Windy,' you say.

With coffees in hand, you and Haline wait for a lift. When one arrives, you both make way for a gaggle of winter clerks who strut out, on their own caffeine run. These are the top law students in the city, and over these few weeks between semesters the firm is showing them the incredible lifestyle that they, too, could have if they decide to accept a job at Civility Place pending completion of their degrees.

'Smug little shits,' says Haline, as the doors close. 'Did you hear one of their induction modules is Aerial Yoga for Stress Management? One day they'll realise no one here gives a flying fuck about people who can only function properly in Suspended Updog.'

In the Level 403 kitchen, you take a sip of your coffee and realise the milk in it is burnt. You pull the plastic lid off the cup and pour what remains down the sink.

‘I can’t bear to start work,’ says Haline. ‘Let’s go see Pravin.’

You drop into Pravin’s office and ask about his weekend. ‘What weekend?’ he says. ‘I haven’t left since Friday.’

‘That’s terrible,’ says Haline.

‘It’s okay,’ Pravin shrugs. ‘I’m getting efficient. Now I spend every waking minute doing work, and I’ve done an online course on lucid dreaming that’s shown me how I can hang out with mates while I’m asleep. So I still have a sort of social life. Wild times, actually, all while taking naps under this desk. Boy, did I dream we got smashed last night.’

Your attention drifts. You stare at the collage on the wall of Pravin’s office.

It’s part of the firm’s billion-dollar art collection, which has been built with the dual aim of Supporting Artists while Creating a Vibrant Office Environment. The initiative not only enhances the mental health of the firm’s employees but also satisfies the artistic yearnings of those with an imaginative bent, allowing them to integrate creativity into their working lives without having to sacrifice income or material comfort.

The collage in this office appears to depict a giant black Scottish terrier standing in an empty courtroom contemplating a strung-up Mussolini. It’s an artwork that Haline has nicknamed ‘The Scottie Dog of Fascist Depression’, which she declares is the work of an obscure dead artist,

Sad Hamish, who was probably told as a child that he was good with scissors when, in fact, he was not, resulting in a misguided commitment to collage as a literal means of cutting-edge artistic and political expression.

Back at your desk, you attempt, unsuccessfully, to angle your computer screen so that it faces away from passing colleagues, and you spend two unbillable units of time reading articles online.

Floods, the Middle East, an Australian exclusive on Michael Caine. There is a picture of the actor from the late 1960s in which he is surrounded by women wearing tight, white high-waisted pants with the word *ALFIE* emblazoned on their left buttocks.

You snap out of your reading spree when you get to a tragically boring opinion piece on modern Benthamite prison architecture.

Overcome with guilt at wasting more time, you close the window on your screen and look out the glass door, watching all the people pretending not to be watching you.

You hope a warning hasn't flashed up on the screen of anyone downstairs in IT, alerting them to your extra-curricular reading.

Every hour, on the hour, you go to the toilet, just to take a break.

On your third visit today, a senior partner strides in and unzips his fly at the urinal next to you.

It's Phillips Tom. He's never spoken to you before, even though you are in his practice group.

‘Morning,’ he says.

‘Morning.’

‘Lovely day.’

‘Yes it is.’

‘Chin Lin Rao, isn’t it?’

‘Ah, it’s Rao Lin Chin.’

‘Lin, how are you enjoying your career?’

‘It’s going very well, thanks ... Phillips.’

‘Good. Good to hear. Bright young fellow like yourself – you could be moving up in this little tower of ours in no time. You know, Lin, I should get you involved on a new matter for Xynorab. We’ll be working with their lawyers in Beijing. How are you placed for a conference call at seven on Wednesday morning? Do you have capacity?’

‘I have a few things to—’

‘It’ll be a valuable learning experience. You should be on the call.’

‘Ah, then,’ you say, ‘I have capacity.’

‘Good. That is very good to hear.’

Two streams drum against the glass urinals and drip to a pause.

By the time two o’clock rolls around, you have finally begun reworking your first billable piece of correspondence for the day.

Dear Mr Laing, you type.

A profound start.

But you’re starting to feel strange. Your chest feels tight.

You take your hand off the mouse and put both palms flat on the table to steady yourself. You feel as if you might

start hyperventilating and indeed you would, if you weren't surrounded by colleagues. It's becoming apparent to you that you may be having a mild panic attack.

You don't understand why this is happening. You've spent years at this desk feeling completely fine and this has hardly been a stressful day in comparison to all the others.

You glance at the other lawyers perched on their death chairs behind their glass doors, tapping away at their keyboards. No one else seems panicked.

This is, after all, Civility Place.

You go to the kitchen to make some chamomile tea. Maybe that will calm you down.

Your hands tremble as you take a cup and plate from the shelf and pull a tea bag from its individual paper envelope.

As you fill the cup from the tap, you wonder why the tea isn't turning yellow and then realise that you have your thumb on the button for cold water.

Just your luck – the firm's Managing Partner also seems to have had an urge to make a cup of tea, and is approaching the sink where you're standing.

You've never seen him on this floor, nor up so close. Usually you watch him from afar giving an official welcome, or see him in videos that screen on loop in the kitchen, delivering firm-wide news updates for staff.

You turn to the Managing Partner and force a smile, while your hands, cup and plate shake and clatter.

He considers you, clearly unaware of who you are.

‘Nice to run into you again,’ he says. ‘How’s your career going?’

‘It’s going very well, thanks, John.’

‘Great,’ he nods. ‘Brilliant.’

Your hands are still fumbling around. You spill the tea, which lands all over John’s designer shoes and socks. Panicked, you grab a paper towel and zone in. But John is there before you, of course. He is, after all, a Partner and a Managing one at that.

‘I’m so sorry,’ you say, as he cleans himself up.

‘Lucky your tea’s cold.’

John looks at the paper towel in your hand and you realise that you’ve forgotten to tear the towel from the dispenser and that the entire length of the roll has extended towards his feet.

‘Having one of those days?’ he asks as you both straighten up.

‘I’ve certainly had better.’

You grin through the panic. You’re bursting out of your skin. You want to run right out through the automatic doors to the nearest lift. But you stay standing there, trying to sip the cold tea but finding it hard to connect with the teacup.

‘Must be motion sickness,’ you explain. ‘From the building? Shaking in the wind ...’

‘Yes, a wonderful innovation, isn’t it?’ says John, taking over at the sink and making himself an Earl Grey. ‘A flexible building. Who knew anyone would be able to design a swaying tower that can withstand even earthquakes. Too bad for you, eh?’ John claps a firm hand on your shoulder

and guides you over to the window, through which you can see parts of the city.

Your body feels scattered and numb, almost like it's shutting down.

'This firm has strong roots,' says John. 'Just like this building. We have unmatched staying power, even in adverse conditions.'

He sticks his hands in his pockets and draws his shoulders back, standing tall. 'Look out at this city. Look at how we rise so powerfully above the rest. How do we do it? Through an unshakeable commitment to the provision of top-quality services for our clients! Long after we're both gone, this firm will still be expanding of its own accord, its cogs turning, fuelled by the sheer talent and dedication of hardworking, intelligent people just like yourself.' He puts his hand on your shoulder again. 'Now, why don't you call it a day? You seem like you need a good half-day off.'

'I don't think I could do that. I have deadlines.'

'You know we're serious about mental health, don't you? We're big on that work-life balance thing. We take pride in caring for each other at this firm.'

'Yes.'

'So I think you should go home.'

'I can't leave my work to other people.'

'You can log on remotely, can't you? That way you can meet your deadlines *and* get some rest.'

'I suppose so. I suppose I should go home.'

'Good idea,' he smiles. 'Go get a life, then. Go on, you.'

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You return to your office.

You pick up your keys and drop them into your back pocket. You do the same with your mobile. Then a blue pen. Then a black pen.

You start grabbing every item within reach and filling your pockets with them. Highlighters, Post-it notes, even a red self-inking 'DRAFT' stamp. Anything and everything goes.

Why are you panicking? You still don't know.

The glass around you hums – your panic is vibrating through the building. It stretches all the way down into the roots of the tower and further.

Your panic is bottomless and so, it seems, are your pockets.

The more items you drop into them, the more room your pockets seem to have. Postage stamps, paperclips, pencils, free two-packs of Anzac biscuits from the kitchen, the banana from the fruit box, your landline phone, a heavy-duty hole puncher, your in-tray, manila folders, binders from your shelves, an old, annotated *Corporations Act*. Your chair even fits into the right outer pocket of your jacket without touching the edges. You slide your computer screen into one of the inner pockets with no problems at all.

The more you panic, the less people notice you. Not even the secretaries sitting right outside your door turn their heads. *Clickety, clickety, click*, go their computer keys. Lawyers are returning to the floor through the automatic doors, holding their coffees out in front of them and failing to see you pick up your desk, turn it on its side, and lower it, legs first, into your pants. You are sweating. The air conditioning is raising goose bumps on your skin.

You keep at it until you've cleared everything.

The entire office is now in your pockets but your pockets look like they're completely empty.

You still haven't calmed down. You gulp down the rest of the cold tea – it dribbles down your chin – and you slide open your office door. You walk neatly and urgently out of the office, through the automatic doors, to the lifts, through the egg beaters and all the way down the hill to the station.

On the train, the carriage is almost empty.

You rest your head against the window.

A man has followed you in. He's wearing a brown parachute tracksuit with fluoro green stripes. The pants have been cut off above the knee, probably with an axe.

He sits right next to you, despite the spare seats. He breathes down your neck. He smells like cigarettes and beer and last week's fried chicken. He stares at you and rubs his crotch.

You are suffocating. You pull open a carriage window and the air that blows in is warm and also smells of nicotine and alcohol and oil.

You hold your hands in front of you. They're still trembling.

You burst out of the train three stops early and walk, dizzy, through the afternoon all the way to your front door, tracing the railway line to keep your sense of direction.

For some time, you sit on the couch in your living room, staring at the curtain.

Eventually, your deadlines come to mind. You reach into your back pocket for your remote access token. You need it

to access the firm's intranet from your home computer.

Instead, your pocket produces a set of pencils, Post-it notes, the red 'DRAFT' stamp, and an ergonomic keyboard made in the shape of a wave.

'Fuck.'

Next the computer screen comes out, followed by a glass filing cabinet.

It takes the whole night to empty your pockets. Your remote access token is nowhere to be found.

The complete contents of your office are now in your living room.

'My God,' you say, when you check your pockets one last time and pull out the heel of a shoe, followed by the secretary attached to it.

Mona straightens up, pulls down her skirt and smooths her hair. 'Here's that conflict check. I only just got around to it. Oh, and your remote access thingy.' She hands you the token and some crumpled printouts, then walks off to the kitchen.

'How did ...' you say. 'What are ...'

You touch the back of your hand to your forehead. It feels both hot and cold. If you were to average this out, you think, you might have a temperature of no medical concern.

You change into your usual striped pyjamas, wrap a blanket around your shoulders and pull the death chair up to your computer. You begin the email to the purple cow juice company once again.

Dear Mr Laing, you type. We refer to your email of 31 July.

A purple cow is chewing on grass and begins nibbling on your fingers but its bite isn't clean, it's crooked, and you are so appalled by the jagged mess those teeth are making that you wake yourself up to find that you've been drooling on your keyboard.

You wipe your cheek with your forearm and hold your hands up to eye level against the morning light. You try to will them steady but they continue to tremble. At least your fingers are still there, and the nightmare cow isn't.

Phillips Tom walks by, zipping up his fly and wrinkling his nose at your striped attire.

'Settled in for the night, did we?' he says, and exits via the bathroom door. 'I have a new matter for you, by the way,' he calls out from the toilet. 'Tell me you have capacity.'

Hot on his trail is a highly strung Scottish terrier barking out numbers in Italian from one to six, its tail wagging from side to side in time with each bark.

You feel weak but you can't afford to take any more sick leave.

You don't bother with breakfast. You change, comb your hair, straighten your tie, pick up your bag and leave the house.

Halfway down the street, you have a strange urge to look back at your apartment block.

It shimmers, mirror-like, and seems to be expanding upwards.

You turn and hurry to the station, telling yourself that it's a hallucination, that it will be better when you return,

that some screw – probably made of glass – has come irretrievably loose inside your head.

The lift in Civility Place declares that it is a good morning and makes a favourable comment about the weather.

‘Morning,’ you reply.

‘Your target for today,’ says the lift, ‘is 26.4 billable hours, taking into account yesterday’s unmet target.’

To your surprise, your office is just as it usually is.

Everything you put in your pockets yesterday is back where it used to be. Your computer is plugged in. The stationery spread out on your desk quivers, itching to be used.

As you contemplate the scene, you try to slide your hands into your jacket pockets but your fingertips can’t seem to find the openings.

In fact, all of your pockets have closed up – sewn shut like those of a new suit.

You sit at your desk thinking about Windy.

Windy used to be a Senior Associate at the firm. Her name was really Wendy but she was from New Zealand.

Windy wasn’t like Beth from Banking. She was dumpy, eccentric and an oversharer, and more often than not sported ladders in the calves of her stockings.

Windy complained daily of feeling sick in her stomach.

‘I just can’t work out what it is,’ she said one day, leaning over her secretary’s desk. She clutched her belly, which had swollen to the size of a gigantic inflatable beach ball but hadn’t yet developed multicoloured stripes.

‘Women hold stress in their stomachs,’ declared her secretary.

‘It can’t be stress,’ said Windy. ‘It’s probably indigestion.’

‘Every day of the year?’ you asked. ‘Maybe it *is* stress.’

‘It has to be indigestion,’ said Windy. ‘I can’t afford to be stressed. I have a mortgage to pay.’

She pulled out her purse, twisted the clasp and flipped it open, revealing a crumpled photo stuffed into a plastic insert.

‘This is my house,’ she said.

‘You keep a photo of your house in your purse?’

‘It motivates me to come to work.’

She handed you her purse and you took a closer look at the picture.

‘Hang on, this isn’t a house. It’s Civility Place.’

‘What?’ She grabbed it back and stared at the photo.

‘You’re right. How strange. When I first moved in, it was a cottage.’

The secretary rolled her eyes. You watched her open a new window on her computer screen. *Psycho*, she typed and clicked *send*.

Another secretary halfway across the floor laughed out loud.

‘So,’ you joked, ‘every day you’ve been catching trains from work to work from work.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Windy. ‘I’ve never noticed. I’m so tired these days. I don’t look up at the sky anymore. Are there any stars left?’

A week later, Windy was in the middle of asking her secretary to order her a monitor-riser when she stopped abruptly.

Then she let out a shriek and proceeded to run silently in rectangular patterns around the edges of Level 403, slamming into the intervening glass, over and over again, until paramedics arrived.

It was impossible not to see and hear Windy's meltdown through the walls, floors and ceilings. Everyone pretended she was simply not there. They sidestepped her as they went about their important filing and practice group meetings and two-unit coffee runs.

That night, the cleaners sprayed each of the affected glass walls and windows, and wiped them down with chamois cloths. They removed the cheek marks, the nose and chin marks, and the palm marks with the splayed fingers.

'At least we know it's suicide proof,' said Phillips Tom.

All day you think of the cleaners removing Windy's marks from the glass.

At five o'clock you pick up your keys and wallet. You leave your jacket on the back of your chair, a trick one of the guys once taught you, which apparently suggests to passers-by that one is still in the building when one is really out doing other things, like having a hotel quickie with the new girl from Payroll.

You wait for a lift. Phillips Tom is already there, jamming his thumb against the up arrow.

He looks at you with narrowed eyes and then, with a disdainful flourish, checks the time on his watch.

'I,' you mumble, 'I have a medical appointment.'

'We have that conference call with the Chinese at seven tomorrow morning.'

‘I’ll be on time.’

‘Good,’ says Phillips Tom. ‘Now, go get a life.’

Serge is standing in the foyer, as always, with his hands resting in front of him, one over the other. You take him aside.

‘I need your bike.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I need it right now,’ you say. ‘I can pay you half of what’s in my bank account. You can buy twenty bikes with it.’

He picks up a phone concealed behind the birds of paradise.

‘Rob?’ he says. ‘Can you cover for me?’

You’ve been passing your wallet from one hand to the other, and Serge notices they’re trembling.

‘You okay?’

‘I have to get out of here.’

‘Follow me,’ he says.

In the car park, he asks where you’re going.

‘Far away. All those places you talked about. Tokyo, maybe.’

You transfer him the money on the spot.

‘Have a good trip,’ winks Serge, handing you a pair of aviators. ‘Send me a postcard.’

Aviators on, you are riding out of the city, past beaches and over mountain ranges, and the whole time you are singing ‘Serge, Serge, the concierge’, and you are overtaking slow trucks on highways, and you are passing bright lights and small towns, and the sun is warming your back, and the

wind billows inside your shirt, and the air is crisp, and the birds are calling.

You are taking trains and buses and boats, and you are crossing seas to places where people offer you food in strange tongues and write you directions in unfamiliar scripts, and your hands are steady, and your soul is lifting, and the smiling face of a once young pop star with white teeth and white wings appears against a fluffy white backdrop of clouds and sings gently to you about a summer holiday in a place where the sun shines brightly and the sea is blue.

And then you slow down and begin to walk, and you discover a billboard filled with white-panted women, and you spy the word *HOTEL* emblazoned in bold on their buttocks, and the billboard is pointing you to an arched hedge.

You wander down the green tunnel and it is rustling around you, and you are dreaming of white high-waisted pants and white terry-towelling robes and white bubble baths and crisp white sheets when you begin to hear a familiar *whump, whump, whump*.

There, at the end of the tunnel, are those six revolving blades.

Serge is standing in the foyer, one hand resting over the other. The birds of paradise seem to have been rearranged by an ikebana artist of unsound mind. Their stems have been driven into metal stakes and they peck at each other as if in pain.

You find you are wearing a sleek new suit and holding an expensive briefcase in one hand.

‘*Konnichiwa*,’ says Serge, bowing. ‘Welcome to Civility Place.’

You say nothing in response. You take off his aviators, drop them on the glass floor and crush them with the heel of your designer shoe.

‘Shame,’ says Serge. ‘They weren’t a bad pair.’

A stream of Beths from Banking, wearing shiny black heels with red undersides, clack past you to the lifts. You follow them.

‘Good morning,’ says the lift in its smooth voice. ‘Phillips Tom is waiting for you in the conference room on Level 1200.’

Around you, the Beths assemble. They take sips through straws from bottles of juice branded with ugly purple cows with bad teeth.

‘What flavour is that?’ you ask them.

‘Fruits of the Valley,’ they say.

‘Does it really taste like fruits from a valley?’ you ask. ‘What fruits even grow in valleys?’

‘It’s everything we could have asked for,’ they say in the voice of the lift, ‘and more.’

As the doors close, the automated voice of civilisation announces that you are rising to Level 1200, to the very top of the hill, to the very peak of the world, into the clouds, into the sky, and beyond.