

The Fear

Wait, stay calm. Tries to control his breathing; he's shaking. Can't silence the roar of blood like the ocean at Spring tide in his ears. Burning up – he's on fire. Dizzy. Trembling. Light-headed. Vision blurred. Clammy palms, sticky fingers. Fists clenched, white knuckles. He's afraid, so afraid. These physiological symptoms only accentuate this all-consuming sense of terror. Panting like a dog. Lack of oxygen, like the air's been sucked thin by some invisible force. These are new sensations. He had always felt as though he had been in control – until recently.

35 and he's at a crossroads. He had never really given the future all that much consideration. But now his path stretched out behind him like streaming endless ribbons; roads without beginning or end, asphalt bands disappearing into the dark horizon of lost history, and the future is well out of hand. *This isn't supposed to be how it is, this isn't what life is supposed to be like.* He didn't want to admit his confusion and fear. Fear of what precisely? A fear of fear... there's a wasted life for every day that passes, yet here he is, simply killing time.

Never certain of what he wanted, he was now certain of just one thing: that this is not what he wants. He is leaving some day. Someday never comes. Shuffles more papers around his characterless veneer desk, one in a long line of characterless veneer desks in this characterless office. A sea of dead and empty faces surrounds him. This is hell, death with walls. Falling into this job had been so easy, like falling into a pile of cushions, easy, painless, but then immediately it had become like falling endlessly as in a dream, spiralling inexorably downward, helpless in the darkness, expecting – hoping – initially at least – that the bottom would be near and would afford a soft landing and an easy, obvious exit. But as time wore on and the fall continued, hope faded along with the light above, so far away now, disappearing to a pin-prick at the top of the abyss, soon to be swallowed by the eternal void.

It would only be for a few months, he had told himself, time to build experience and to find his feet. Time to settle his finances and devise a more concrete long-term plan. To consider the options, to approach his future strategically, and to

apply for ways out from a more secure position. But plans can go wrong. The best laid plans and all that. That had been seven years ago. A year had elapsed and he had not given a moment's thought to the future, beyond the vague notion of 'some day.' But someday never comes. Two years, three, and he was in a rut. Colleagues came and went. More empty faces and hollow smiles from names he would forget more quickly than he would learn them, as quickly as they would appear and disappear, just passing through. When would he pass through?

It was all too easy to get sucked in and to forget about life when on the conveyor-belt of clocking on and clocking off, the endless stream of papers for stamping and stapling, filing, dispatch and disposal.

He had heard stories of employees who had snapped, gone crazy, running screaming and swearing down the aisles, thrown sheaves of confidential documents out of the window, raining down like tickertape on the streets below to the confusion and astonishment of the passers-by. He'd even heard of there having been a jumper once. Ended up as pavement-pizza, but astoundingly still alive, now simply existing in a semi-vegetable state, a crippled slobbering mess, physically and mentally incapacitated for the remainder of his sorry life. No control.

He could not understand such wayward, destructive acts, so lacking in rationale, reason or dignity, much less respect them. Breaking loose, letting go, what could it achieve? Truly, in the long term, no good could come of it: only pain, anguish and humiliation. Humiliation is a disease. To crack like that was, after all, to admit failure, surely. And failure was beyond the spectrum of his vocabulary, his sphere of comprehension. He was determined to never allow himself to taste the bitter tang of failure, yet, simultaneous to his self-made and private avowal, he was also aware that he was not a success. Yet. He was destined for more, of this he was convinced. For now, though, he would have to bide his time: endure.

Cosseted by the stability of the 9-5, life was at least bearable, tolerable on a day-to-day basis. No alarms and no surprises. The office existed as a security blanket of towering breeze-blocks, girders, concrete slabs, glass plates and mile after mile of cables and pipes that created the manmade intestines of the labyrinthine corridors of power. The staff, the worker ants, were the capillaries, while the invisible networks carried the corporation's real life-blood, its vast quantities of stored information, between the lesser organs, the servers and terminals. Somewhere, invisible, hidden away from all, was the pulsating heart of the organisation. Its identity was a mystery,

perhaps even a myth, much like the fundamental purpose of the corporation itself. Was it, like a virus whose sole purpose is to replicate itself, simply to make money through the movement of information? It didn't do to question. So better to just shut your mouth.

But as he sat at his workstation, the humdrum of his familiar surroundings suddenly struck him as unnatural. The proximity to perfect strangers forced together simply by virtue of but one common feature of their uniformly sad and undistinguished lives, namely their employment, felt forced and desperate. This enclosed alienation, accentuated by the melding of man to machine, was death with walls. It made his head swim. Reeling, he felt entirely at a loss, spinning, drowning in an eternal vortex. He scanned, for the umpteenth time, the report before him on the flat-screen VDU. Try as he might, it was proving impossible to unravel the central points, to boil it down to something meaningful. Where was it going? In that instant, the report on screen became emblematic of life itself – meandering, pointless, meaningless, directionless, futile. A distant noise; the subtle whiff of decay. The air was growing stagnant. The fear was rising once more.

The length and breadth of the office floor, clerical staff went anonymously about their anonymous business of conducting business for the business, a business for which they cared for not one iota on a personal level, so far removed were they from the company's true objectives – whatever they were. Pen-pushing of this nature was only ever a means to an end for the nameless number-crunchers, the chairpounding proletariat. Dead-end street. There were only two options, going forward: pass through quickly or become a part of the furniture. Either way, no-one paid anyone else any real attention, there was no real sense of community. Occasionally there were whispers, so-and-so unheard of from accounts had been caught *in flagrante delicto*, with their trousers down – literally – with so-and-so, also unheard of from service support on the desk of such-and-such a manager, identifiable perhaps by name but never by face. Feuds between colleagues that came to a head on departmental nights out, team-building trips or at Christmas parties also occasionally circulated via the rumour-mill, but most of it was largely meaningless, and none of it ever really amounted to anything. Such mild distractions provided a break from the monotony for the majority of the lifetime factotums who populated the open-plan spaces, but in truth only perpetuated the eternity and turgid blankness of such gainless, thankless employ. The fact remained that ultimately everyone existed within

their own solipsistic little bubble and would rapidly retreat like hermit crabs when faced by a prowling predator if they had dared to venture beyond their regulated confines even momentarily.

Where was his life headed? Seven long years... and what, precisely, was the sum of his achievements? He was no armchair philosopher – he hadn't time for such trivia or such vague conceptual thinking, and preferred to remain wholly grounded in the realities of the concrete world – but in his occasional moments of introspection, those few and fleeting quiet times, he could not help but feel somehow cheated by life. Such long and circuitous routes to arrive at more or less the same place as one started... was it worth the grief? The beginning is also the end. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. His skin felt rough and dry, his eyes sensitive and watery. But at least his breathing was coming more easily now, his palpitations abated, replaced by a more regular, if piston-like rhythm. He was able to focus on his screen once more. The telephone rang. Back to life, back to reality, back to business as usual.