

The Retention Device

by *Emily Zasada*

1.

It was winter in Minneapolis; a warm gust of tropical air came pouring across the park behind me. I waited at the crosswalk for the light to change. My head hurt again, but that was nothing unusual. I used to optimistically say that my headache was coming or going, but lately I'd come to the conclusion that I needed to face the truth: this was just one long, endless headache.

All I could think about was the ratty pharmaceutical coupon at the bottom of my purse. I'd won it on eBay, paid too much for it in the heat of an irrational bidding war, my fingers trembling on my touchpad as I typed in one set of numbers, deleted them, typed in another set, the value of them no longer making any sense.

And then I won, but the actual price of it – the price I was paying – settled in as I completed the auction. I typed in my government-issued pharmaceutical ID and wondered what I was thinking, bidding so much. Then again, I had other motivations as well. The person I was bidding against, damn them, lived in Maryland, and I wouldn't let them have this too!

I lived in Maryland once. All of that was gone now, along with quite a chunk of the East Coast.

Now, weeks after I won it and after it arrived in the decrepit mail, delivered by someone who looked like a heroin addict and who asked me if I had any diet soda (I said no), it no longer mattered what it cost. The way I was feeling at the moment, I would have gladly signed over my next paycheck to buy one if I hadn't had this one already.

I'd left my pills at home. My headache started when I was driving down the freeway. I could feel it moving in with increasing force as if it were pressing towards me through the windshield. As strange as it sounds, I appreciated the pain. It was so complete that it blocked out everything else, like how I felt about this job, or Joe, or our future together, or the future of everything, really.

As I was thinking and waiting for the light, I watched the construction project across the street next to the skyscraper where I worked. A few large, silver bolts fell from the scaffolding and crashed through the fronds of

a palm tree. The silver bolts weren't there long. Two of the giant squirrels, the new kind, materialized from the shadows behind a parked bulldozer. They were chattering away to one another in that raspy manner these new squirrels had, like three-pack-a-day smokers. They raced out, grabbed the bolts in their paws, and sat there for a moment in the warm sun, spinning them around and sniffing them. A mother walking with a stroller stopped when she saw them, and carefully turned the stroller around. I didn't blame her. I'd seen the stories on the news about the squirrels too. They were as big as cats; some were even bigger.

2.

Somehow, in spite of my headache, and in spite of the tremendous crashing and pounding that reverberated from the construction site next door, I managed to write two reports that morning. They were both analyses on the market position of two different divisions of the Company. In both cases the competition was fierce, margins low, and prospects dim. I had no recommendations at this point other than to cut costs.

Working for a corporation was certainly nothing like I thought it would be. I expected working light bulbs, carpets that didn't smell like mold, and to have my desk's drawers close correctly. I had none of these things. I did have a paycheck.

When I'd started working there, everything seemed strange, apathetic; it was an innocuous chaos: from the flickering bulbs and the forms to the sad stacks of outdated technology in the dark basement. But a mere three months later, it was becoming normal. Just that morning I didn't even stop to think before I rattled the door to the office supplies closet so the rats knew I was coming.

They say they are all like this now. You would never know these were separate companies once. They all contracted one another's goals and vision statements now, like communicable colds back and forth. They all use the same ads, but just swap out the words—it's futile anyway. Trust me; no one pays attention to advertising anymore, its allure tarnished by outdated ubiquitous banality.

I'd only been working there for three months, and while I knew there was a pharmacy somewhere inside the skyscraper because Miles had told me so, I had no idea where it was. I tried to ping Miles three times but never got an answer. No matter how much I kept swiping back to my instant messaging app and staring at that screen, all I saw was my cursor blinking at me softly.

I really didn't want to ask anyone else. I didn't want any uncomfortable questions. My headaches are my own dark secret. Offices these days like to perform collective diagnoses. We all knew none of us were paid enough to see real doctors. That would be all I needed, to catch vague murmurings about brain tumors from behind me in the kitchen when all I wanted to do was microwave my lunch.

So I was on my own. I was pretty sure he said it was only open during lunch. But at what time? Noon? One?

In the lobby there are no maps, no guides, and no list of offices. The Company cannot afford security and discourages wandering. They have cameras up near the ceiling to show that they're serious. I don't blame

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them; if their competitors could see how decrepit many of these offices have become, the shabbiness of its divisions, they would all be collectively grinning and moving in for the kill. All of these giant companies are fraying at the edges; it's just the way it is these days.

I took a guess and headed for the thirty-eighth floor. The elevator creaked and gasped up the worn cables

and track. The Company had its own healthcare coupon division on this floor, but it was doing terribly. I knew this because I'd written up an analysis just last week.

The floor looked even worse than the one my office was on; the carpets were a dingy orange, and the walls were the flattest, dullest white I'd ever seen, as if the walls sat there all day eating light. There was a faint smell of mildew everywhere, and the sound – faint, but unmistakable – of dripping from behind one of the walls.

But I was in luck; the pharmacy was there. My coupon only covered the tiniest fraction of the cost. Normally I would have done mail-order, which is what the coupon was really meant for, but orders disappeared that way sometimes.

I held onto the counter and agreed to everything I was supposed to agree to: the exorbitant costs, the disclaimers. "I'll sign anything I need to

sign," I said.

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I loved these pills because they worked immediately. I could feel the pain lifting even before I pushed the elevator button.

I thought I heard a curious whirring somewhere up near the ceiling. Like a bee, maybe, or a fly. They were bigger these days too. I instinctively ducked, but didn't see anything as I looked around—only the cameras, which seemed to be pointed at a different angle than before.

Then, behind me, one of the six elevator doors opened. The light above it wasn't working as if it had burned out. No surprise there.

Almost as soon as I got on the elevator, I realized I hadn't been on it before. I knew because it had an extravagant red carpet, the plush kind; it was squishing pleasantly under my shoes.

My hand was hovering in the place where the button to third floor should have been when I realized that it wasn't there. In its place was a smooth metal panel. There was nothing on that elevator wall except for the obligatory notice about the maximum number of occupants.

Worry started to zap through me. How was it possible that I was in an elevator without buttons?

I turned around and took a deep breath. There were buttons there, small ones, in a recessed panel. One read "42R" and the other simply read "G." I looked at my watch, hesitated, and looked at the button for 42R.

Oh, why not, I thought. As if I had a choice!

But I pretended that I did, and pressed the button.

3.

The first thing I noticed was the sunlight. It was flowing, unfettered, in long diagonal streams.

The second thing I noticed was the sense that I was floating. Without thinking about it, I took a step back and felt like I was about to fall.

Once I was able to focus, I saw what appeared to be a catwalk just outside the elevator. I stepped out on it, and that was when I saw people

suspended from the ceiling: bodies lifelessly hanging, rotating slowly in a long wide oval far above the ground.

There had to be forty, maybe fifty. At first, I felt cold all over. I thought they might be dead. But no, almost right away I saw a couple of them shifting a little, saw their chests subtly rise and fall as they coasted close by. Sleeping, then—not dead.

They were strapped into what looked like a leather harness that attached to the ceiling by two long metal chains like a swing. They were all suspended by some kind of metal track; the ceiling at the very top of the skyscraper was too far away to see exactly what was there. The very tops of the chains disappeared into shadows. The noise was cacophonous: a constant squealing and grinding from the machinery as it moved around, echoing off the concrete walls.

There was nothing but those concrete walls and empty space. This giant open area was, I realized, probably a full quarter of the entire skyscraper. Who knew that this was here?

Then I realized, just to my left, a line of people standing on the catwalk. No one was talking. They were all watching, entranced as the sleeping people swayed by one after another; limp bodies suspended from their chains, the machinery rattling and emitting squeals hard and bright.

I watched them too. They were several feet above where I was standing. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I began to make out their faces.

I didn't recognize most of them; thousands of people work for the Company, but I did recognize one or two. They looked different with their suits and dresses wrinkled; their eyes closed and their heads gently tilted to the side.

I heard footsteps just as I saw a person swinging gently in front

of me, sound asleep and rotating along with the others. It was Miles. His head leaned forward on his chest, and he had a small smile on his face as he passed through one of the long warm beams of light that pierced through the empty gloom. His feet and legs were so close that I almost could have touched him. I was on the verge of saying his name despite feeling that I wasn't supposed to. I felt I wasn't supposed to say anything at all. But I couldn't help it and nearly called to him when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder.



I'd seen her around before, the woman who touched my shoulder. She motioned to follow her over to a table. I didn't know which office she worked in, but I'd passed her in the hall many times.

I followed her, conscious the entire time of Miles drifting past the line of people on the catwalk, back towards a shadowy corner where the sun probably never reached.

There was a folding table there, the cheap kind with fake wood veneer that you can get at any of the big box discount stores. I noticed that the ends of its wobbly legs sat on neat little blocks of wood that had been placed on top of the catwalk. The woman was sifting through a stack of papers in front of her and handed one to me. There was nothing else on the table except a touchpad and an official-looking radio, the kind you talk into. It was hissing intermittently, gently, as if it were breathing.

The form had an alarming number of pages, too many to count. The machinery screamed behind me as I stood and tried to make sense of the words in tiny print. The word "Non-Disclosure" was on the top of every page in bold print, and I saw my name strewn throughout the document. "Liability" was another word mentioned over and over.

The woman wore glasses that were reflecting white rectangles of the windows across from us, so I couldn't see her eyes. I could tell from the way she leaned across the table, watching me, that she wasn't very patient. Finally, she grabbed the form from me, flipped to the last page, and tapped the very bottom where the signature line was.

"What is this all about?" I whispered.

Immediately, she put a finger up to her lips, and then she pointed forcefully at the signature line.

I looked behind me. There was Miles, rotating back. He was budging slightly, shifting, his eyes still closed. I looked closely and noticed that other people were moving minutely too. Legs were swinging gently; heads were tilting forward or back, bodies adjusting to an external force. Clothes rustled softly like sleepless sheets at night.

The woman was writing something on a piece of scrap paper, scribbling with a small pencil that looked gnawed. Then she turned it around, slid it across the table to face me: YOU CAN REVIEW IT LATER. IN YOUR PERSONAL PORTAL. SIGN NOW.

I've thought about this a lot since—why I signed. I think it had to do with that sentence. It gave all of this a comforting official aura. Whatever this was, the Company was behind it.

It was strange here – and I couldn't say I liked any of it – yet I felt that I belonged. When I walked outside those days, nothing was familiar. I never knew what to expect with the weather; the sky always looked strange.

But at work, I started to feel I understood the flow of my days; it was safe and predictable. Sometimes it was boring and other times just terrible, but already I felt like I belonged here more than my own home.

Then Miles slowly rotated past on his hollow axis once again. He was so familiar yet not all at the same time. Whatever this was, I remember thinking, if Miles is a part of it, then it must be okay.

So I signed.

She reached into a cardboard box under the table, pulled out an unlabeled bottle of pills, and handed them to me. She did this slowly so that they wouldn't rattle.

Even the pills, I thought, are supposed to be quiet. After I signed, she pointed to the line of people, and I went to the back of it obediently just

like everyone else, holding the pills still in my hand.

As I stood there, I studied how all of this worked. I discovered that the catwalk branched off to a tall metal staircase that ended at an open platform. Gradually, one by one, the people in the swings were waking up. Stirring, they picked up their heads as their eyes crept open. They blinked and rubbed them a little. Upon waking, they held up one finger as if they were signaling for a cab.

I moved up in the line enough so that I was able to see what happened next. Each subsequent person at the top of the steps grabbed a long metal hook hanging on a pole. Then they reached out, put the hook around the leather harness, and were pulled in by an invisible impetus. Each person unstrapped themselves from the harness when they awoke and handed it to the next person. Immediately, that person would take a pill out of the little plastic bottle they were carrying, strap themselves into the harness, and swing back out and start moving in the long wide oval. They would sway back and forth for a while until the swing was settled by gravitational force. It seemed they had only enough time to tuck the little pill bottle into a small pocket in the side of the harness, then they fell asleep immediately.

I noticed that the movement of the swings and the harnesses automatically slowed down just as someone got off and someone else got on. But still, I worried: what if I wasn't fast enough?

Why was I agreeing to do this at all?

Miles was now all the way across from me in this giant space, far away. As I watched, he floated through a wide pale swath of sun before melding into shadow.

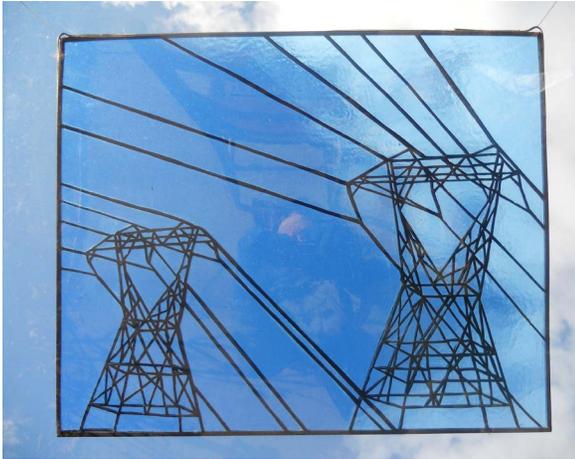
"I'll help you," a voice behind me whispered.

I turned around. I recognized her. I knew she was an executive of some kind. I'd even talked to her during my first week of orientation, seen her around with a tall man with droopy eyes who always wore a suit. I thought they might be a couple. Probably not married; people hardly got married anymore. Once health insurance vanished, marriage vanished too.

Maybe those things still exist somewhere else in another dimension. A land populated by things like veils, tuxedos and free pills for all.

She was one of the few people who seemed curious about me, but I was unsure why. She was wearing a rose-colored suit and held a pair of matching heels in her hand to avoid getting stuck in the metal gridded floor.

I nodded but was uncertain. Did I want help? Why was I here?



I looked around and saw that the few people I did recognize were all senior management. Everyone seemed to treat this as something normal that they would be doing, as if this were no different than waiting in line at the subway, or waiting at a bus stop. They looked indifferent and bored.

I remember thinking there was something hypnotic about that: the boredom. Whenever a thing acquires the lusterless film of the everyday: how strange can it be? She showed me how to use the hook when a middle-aged man signaled to us while yawning and stretching his legs. It was easier than I thought. The harness fell apart when you twisted a knob that looked like a deadbolt on a door. It only took a few seconds.

"Don't forget the pill." the woman in the rose-colored suit whispered to me, just as I swung off the platform. I wasn't going to forget. Those few seconds when I swung away were horrifying. The ground was much farther away than I would have ever thought. All I could see below me were bright empty sunbeams. Beneath that—darkness. Outside the window, the sun was brilliant. Clouds floated by fast, with that new look they had these days, like they might grow even brighter and explode.

I took the pill.

I dreamt every time that I did this. Much like regular dreams, I couldn't recall exactly what happened or in what order. However, these weren't entirely like regular dreams. For one, I was still partially aware of my surroundings; when I passed through the sun, I could feel it, warm and pleasant, but distant; as if I were watching someone else, imagining what it felt like to be that person at that particular moment. I was aware, but remotely, of the squealing, groaning machinery far above me and other sounds too: maybe footsteps or the faint thud of a shoe falling to the floor below. Then

there was always the cacophony from the construction site outside; off-beat, energetic crashes and thumps.

Nothing seemed completely real, like it was happening to someone else completely removed from my life.

The dreams felt real. I can't remember all of them exactly afterwards, but during they were vivid and sharp. More vivid than reality.

I do remember a lot about that first dream. I dreamt that I was on the Eastern Shore just the way it used to be before the oceans rose and everything along the coast sunk and was gone for good. I dreamt I was on the very top of a tall hotel, one with a skating rink on top of the roof. I knew that I could fly, so I did. I pushed off lightly with my feet and was floating over the ocean. I learned how to turn my body so that I could sink down at angles and then go up again. The sun was in my hair and eyes as I went towards the sky, and then I discovered how to descend, fast, so I was able to skim over the ground, inches from the sand. I could even smell the salt air and hear the waves as they crashed just below me.

It was the most perfect dream I'd ever had.

When I woke up, I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. It could have been years, or days, any time at all.

Later I learned that it was just about twenty minutes, and was always about twenty minutes. That was how long the drug lasted. It ticked inside all of us like an efficient little clock.

The dream hung around me for a while, as if I were walking in the middle of some bright, lovely cloud. I got off the platform and made my way down the other side of the steps, the hard shine of the metal gradually coming more into focus along with the rest of it. The line, the sleeping people, the rows of windows extending up as high as I could see—I remembered that Miles had been here, just like me.

On my way back to the elevator, I searched each face I could see. But Miles was already gone.

4.

Long ago, I went to college with Miles. He was my best friend. At the time, he had another girlfriend, and I had another boyfriend, and I think that we both liked it that way. We were glad that our relationship wasn't complicated by any romantic drama.

Around the time the lawns withered and the suburbs stopped re-

sembling the destination that was planted in many of our heads as the place we were “supposed to go,” all those conventional romantic ideas people had about relationships just seemed to die along with the grass. We began to long for the practical, rather than the unreachable. Love turned into the equivalent of pulling into fast food restaurants and ordering the first thing on the menu

I noticed because I did it too. For me, that was Joe. I guess for Miles, that was Lisa. I don't know Lisa very well, though now that we live in Minneapolis, I see her every night on the news. She always looks perfect and hopeful. Joe's mother loves her, because she's in the market for that kind of hope. If you want to know the truth, the fact that Joe's mother likes her makes me dislike her, but there's no one on the planet I could say this to, so I don't. And, anyway, she could be all Miles ever wanted.

5.

When I got back to my desk, I didn't feel like I'd been sleeping. That same glittery clarity that had been in my dream while I was flying, hung around for several hours. I looked around me and wondered if everyone knew, if everyone at this company had done the same thing that I had. I wanted to ask someone, but I remembered the silence up on the catwalk, and the form that repeatedly mentioned nondisclosure and liability. Some forms could be taken seriously, and others less so. Since I didn't know what kind of form I signed, it would be better not to ask anyone, for now.

Except for Miles, I thought. I could trust Miles. Who else did I have to trust?

Besides, now that I was back at my desk, it all had an aura of illusion. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of side effect brought on by the headache I'd had earlier, some after-the-fact hallucination. Maybe, I thought, if that's really the case, I shouldn't ask Miles after all. In case none of it was real.

But I didn't feel as if it were related to my headache. In fact, I hadn't felt so great in as long as I can remember—certainly not since I'd moved to Minnesota. I was perfectly focused on everything that I was doing and managed to get five reports done before the end of the day. I was so focused, in fact, that I didn't notice how late it was until I eventually looked up and saw that the sky outside the windows was just starting to darken; purses and travel mugs had disappeared from the desks all around me, just as if someone had snuck in with an eraser and rubbed them all away. Even the banging from the construction project next door had finally stopped.

I uploaded the reports I'd completed to my personal portal, and saw that I had new messages. Some were about upcoming assignments, but one simply had today's date.

I opened it and there it was: the agreement that I'd signed earlier that day up on the catwalk. Evidence that it actually happened, that it wasn't a hallucination after all.

I scrolled through, reading it. As I did, all those pleasant feelings of focus and clarity flew away, off into the stale recycled air. The agreement was specific: I was not to talk about this with anyone. If I did, it would result in termination.

There were other consequences as well. As I read the next section, I began to feel completely cold. The font was different in this section and was a slightly different color. It dangled awkwardly in the middle of the page as if it had maybe been copied and pasted from somewhere else. I realized, it was prepared especially for me, for my situation. It stated that if I ever discussed what they referred to as the “retention device,” that the Company would submit an order to the national healthcare coupon system to have my government-issued pharmaceutical ID blocked. In other words, I would lose the right to buy healthcare coupons from any source, ever again. If that were the case, I would have headache after headache but never be able to do a thing about the pain.

6.

At home, Joe's mother, Eloise, had closed all the windows, but I opened them during dinner. After all, it was seventy-five degrees out, with a warm breeze, and closing the window was going to accomplish nothing. I wanted to tell her that you can't pretend winters into existence, but I haven't said anything like that to her yet. She was angry with me, but she was trying to be polite and hide it, like she always did.

Joe took her side, of course. He always does. If I'd known that before we'd moved here, I don't think I would have come.

It made me sad as I thought of home. I could have cried, thinking about what I'd lost. But what would that have helped? All it would bring me was another headache.

I'd made a stir fry dinner with tempeh and frozen vegetables, and Eloise looked pointedly at both of us as she moved the tempeh over to the side of the plate and ate only the vegetables. The kitchen felt like a closed cardboard box, and the parakeets were chirping in the fading light. I could feel Joe shooting me glances, but I ignored him. I liked tempeh, damn it. If I

was going to be the one who was expected to do the cooking, I was going to make what I liked.

I could feel the beginnings of another headache creeping in, but it was early. Usually the pills lasted a full twenty-four hours. For once, though, I was actually grateful to get one of my headaches. It gave me an excuse to go upstairs and close the door and throw open all of the windows, and let all the strange air pour in.

I fell asleep early, but before I did, I checked my tablet. Still no response from Miles, and now it had been more than ten hours since I'd pinged him.

There was, however, an email from Lisa, his girlfriend. She wanted to follow up on what she'd promised me and Joe that she would do ever since we moved to Minneapolis: invite us to dinner on Sunday.

The next morning a time floated up in my portal, in my reminder box. There was no event attached to it, but I knew what it meant.

I told myself all morning I wasn't going back, yet I found myself back in that elevator again. And when I was on the catwalk, I realized that I couldn't wait for the line to move faster. When I finally strapped myself into the harness and took the pill and swung into that wide, empty space and fell asleep, I dreamt once more that I was flying. I loved every second of it.

While I was up there, a huge storm raged outside. Even while I was dreaming, I was aware of the rain pouring against the windows in grey sheets, and the crashing and pounding of that construction project below. Occasionally, I could feel a drop on my head, or on my arm, even while I was flying.

When I got back to my desk, I noticed that I left an orange smear on some papers I had touched. At first, I couldn't figure it out.

It was a long time later when I remembered how the raindrops fell on me in the middle of my dream. And I realized it was rust.

In the car that weekend on our way to Miles' and Lisa's house, Joe turned the radio on. I immediately turned it off. All the music is awful here. Actually, I suppose it's awful everywhere. But here the awfulness seems more profound.

After a long silence, Joe said: "I don't know what to expect. Besides, I haven't been keeping up too much with the news."

I glanced at him. He was neatly put together, as if someone had unfolded him and taken him out of a box.

"Lisa just reads the news, you know. It isn't as if you need to impress her; she's hardly a real journalist."

"Now we'll have to have them over for dinner," he said, twisting his hands on the steering wheel. The sun was sinking behind the city to our west. The sky was pink and puffy; it looked infected.

"We used to do that kind of thing all the time back in Maryland." I pointed out.

"I know. There's my mother now. You know she isn't always feeling well. It's just hard to plan something like that."

"I know." I looked out the window.

This is the kind of conversation we're having these days.

7.

Lisa and Miles' house was beautiful and seemed new. The deck was glassed in, the way all the new ones were, because of the squirrels. I suppose the bugs, too, although I don't like to think about those. Everything was shiny—the glasses, the polished wood floors, and even Lisa. Miles, however, looked like himself, which was comforting.

I kept glancing at him the whole evening, but he rarely looked back at me.

At dinner, the fish we were having was one of the new kinds, made practically from scratch. I'd read that the scientists had left the fins on when they designed them—more for show than anything else. These kinds of fish really didn't need to swim, or do anything, except grow.

"It was raised on French cheese," Lisa said proudly, as if she'd handed the fish herself. "That's what the package said. This way, you can get the taste of Brie, and your Omega 3's at the same time. The broccoli was from an underground farm in Uruguay."

"It's wonderful," Joe said.

I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn't.

Miles was sitting right next to me, carefully slicing up his fish.

"I forget that these don't really have bones anymore," he said.

"Well, there are a few," Lisa said. "Something has to keep them

together.”

After dinner, Lisa asked Miles to bring up a couple more bottles of wine from the basement. She said that maybe he should bring us with him, that we might like to see it.

“The basement is so interesting,” she explained, “because that's the original part of the house. All of this was rebuilt after a tornado came through, took down half of the houses around the lake. We bought it right

Model: Bethany Rand



after that. What a deal!”

She lowered her voice, glanced behind her, out the window.

“A shame, what happened to the owners, that's the only thing.”

“What happened to them?” Joe asked.

We were in their living room and Lisa was, disconcertingly, also on the TV that was the size of a large window, her head at least ten sizes larger than her real life head. She was replaying a recorded news story she'd been telling us about, about a fire in a skyscraper across town, but what she actually wanted to show us was the size of the new building next to it, a giant hothouse for engineered vegetables. When the TV version of Lisa smiled, I guessed that my entire hand was the size of one of her teeth.

“Oh” Lisa started, and then frowned, “nothing good. You know, it's really a coincidence; I covered that story. Well, sort of a coincidence; I mean, after that, I knew in the back of my mind that the house, what was left of it, was up for sale...”

She trailed off, staring straight at her own giant face, paused and floating there on the screen, smiling brilliantly.

“They died, of course. They didn't find them for weeks; no one expected them to be so far away. They crashed right through the roofs of some of those old abandoned buildings downtown. No one knows what to do about those. They're such a problem!”

She hit the play button again.

“Oh, look,” she said, taking the remote and pausing and zooming in on the building. “See that big thing right there, next to the window? That's a tomato!” I looked around while Lisa and Joe were staring at the TV. Miles had already left the room.

This is my chance, I thought. I got up and followed him.

It took a few minutes, but I finally found Miles in an unfinished room in the basement.

“Hey there,” he said. I tried to read his expression when he saw me, but I got the impression that he was making his expression deliberately unreadable.

“White or red?” he asked.

We were standing below a bare bulb, one of the ultra-efficient kinds. It gave off the thinnest yellow glow you could imagine, as if it were casting off a watered down layer of paint. Whenever either of us moved, giant shadows rippled like monsters across the cinderblock walls.

Even though I was trying to focus on the things I wanted to ask Miles, I couldn't help but think about the dead owners of the house. How not that long ago they used to come down there too, to pull out something to defrost or out of storage. All the normal boring things that people go down to their basements to do, the kind of normal boring things we all do when we don't know the future. They would never have pictured that they and the entire top level of their house – all the familiar things like the windows they looked out of every day and the couches they sat on at night and even the dishes in their cabinets would just get blown away – and that they would wind up dead in an abandoned department store downtown.

They could have never pictured someone like me or Miles standing in their place.

That feeling I've had, of not really belonging anywhere anymore. It was the strongest there that it had ever been. It was so strong that I felt as if I were made out of nothing more than sparks and dust, and that I would blow away at any second too.

Suddenly, I was really upset. I hadn't expected to feel this way, now that it was just me and Miles, but I did.

I asked him if he had been avoiding me.

Miles blinked at me, holding the bottles of wine against his shirt. In this dim light I could see the little creases by his eyes more clearly than ever. They reminded me of time, and made me sad.

"There have just been a lot of things going on," he said. "A lot of things that I'm not supposed to talk about."

I laughed, stared up at the ceiling.

"Yeah, I just signed one of those agreements for those things that I'm not supposed to talk about too. I'm starting to learn *all about* those things that I'm not supposed to talk about. You do realize that I know, right? About—"

I hesitated. I didn't even know how to refer to it: the catwalk, the flying.

Miles looked down. His eyelashes caught the light and looked, for a moment, like tiny golden spider legs.

"I know that you know," he said.

He glanced behind me, towards the stairs.

He said he didn't want to talk about it there. The way he looked at me, and then back at the stairs, I realized he meant that he didn't want to take the chance that Lisa would overhear.

I thought I understood a little better then. Although, looking back, did I? I was probably just relieved that Miles had said anything to me at all. But at the time, I remember thinking that, really, what did I know, about any of this? I didn't know a thing. I may as well have been trying to guess the mysteries of life.

Then Miles reached out and lightly brushed my arm with his hand.

"But, you know, I'm the one who got you this job. I guess I have been avoiding you, and it isn't fair."

He asked me to meet him in the park the next day, when I got off work around four.

I hadn't known that he knew when I got off work. It wasn't much, I guess, but I didn't know until then that I was waiting for any acknowledgement from Miles at all, something to make me feel like I still mattered to him in some way.

That was all it took.

And maybe, looking back, he had calculated that.

8.

I was in meetings all the next morning and into the afternoon, but when I got back to my desk, I started keeping an eye on the time. There's a regular clock there, an old one, which someone put on a pole in the middle of the room. Most of the day all you could hear was the noise coming from the construction site outside, but on the few occasions when they paused,



Model: Bethany Rand

you could hear the soft lurching click of the hands as they moved around the dial.

When I could hear it, it was all I was aware of. All I wanted was for the end of the day to get there and to see Miles walking towards me from across the park.

Whatever they were working on outside was going up so fast now that there was barely any light left in the office at all. It had gotten like this gradually; at a meeting a few days ago I realized that we were all squinting at one another through the gloom. At one point, I dropped a pen and it was too dark under the table to find it.

It must have been about two o'clock when I realized that if it weren't for the light from my touchpad, I'd barely be able to see anything on my desk. Someone volunteered to go down to the office supplies area in the basement and find some lamps. When that person came back we realized there weren't enough plugs, so a coworker that I'd never talked to before, Annabelle, volunteered to go down to find some extension cords.

I was in the middle of instant messaging with yet another person about that report I'd written when Annabelle brought an extension cord over to my desk. I thanked her, only half aware of her standing there, when I took the extension cord.

That was when I looked down and noticed she didn't have any shoes. She was just wearing a thin pair of black socks, covered in dust. From the basement, I thought, remembering what it was like. I'd only been down there once and it was hard to see, but it looked as if the Company had been tossing random things down there for years.

She saw me looking and our eyes met.

And then she asked, in a whisper: "Do you fly, too?"

I don't know what I would have done if we hadn't heard the crash that came next. Would I have said anything?

I think that, maybe, I would have said that I did fly. But I'll never know.

I don't think I had a second of doubt about what it was. And from the look on her face I don't think that Annabelle did either. It was through the walls and somewhat muffled, but I could tell that we both knew what direction it was coming from.

I thought of how the chains attaching the harnesses had been shaking that morning, how loud the machinery had sounded.

I thought of Miles. And maybe it sounds crazy, but I just knew. Maybe it was the same way that we used to have conversations and guess at one another's thoughts before we said them, back when we were really friends, back before we had this sad adult relationship that was suspended within the shell of something that looked like friendship on the surface, but wasn't. Maybe it had something to do with that.

While Annabelle and I were looking at one another, just looking, trying not to have our expressions change, everyone had rushed over to the window, but of course, what could you see? There was a wall there now, covered in tinted windows, shiny and dark. Everyone seemed to think that there was an accident at the construction site. Everyone seemed to think that was what was wrong.

Within a few minutes there was shouting behind my desk in the hall, followed by even more shouting. Some people sounded excited, as they'd just seen a parade go by.

The tall man with the droopy eyes – the one who I thought was in a relationship with the executive who had helped me that first day on the catwalk – appeared behind me. He was looking at a watch on his wrist when he walked in, and then he glanced over at Annabelle and me.

He straightened the sleeves of his suit.

"Fire," he said mildly.

"I'm sorry?"

"There's a fire in the building." He said this in a way that implied he didn't quite believe it. He kept glancing behind him, at the people pouring into the elevators and stairwells down the hall.

"I don't smell smoke," I said. I didn't believe a thing he was saying. But that was when I looked at him closer, and I saw tears in his eyes.

"I know," he said smiling gently, "but you all have to leave anyway. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you."

He hesitated and said: "But the loudspeaker system hasn't worked in years."

9.

I knew that Miles wasn't going to show up, but I waited in the park

anyway. I waited as the sun sunk lower in the sky and the shadows from the magnolias grew longer.

After some time, I gave up and went home.

10.

Since then, I occasionally dream of flying, but it's always the same dream.

In it, I'm inside the skyscraper, in the secret part that you would never know is there. Everyone is strapped into their harnesses, sleeping, slowly spinning.

That is, everyone but me. I'm hovering, hummingbird-like, through the long slanted rays of sun, the sun – so far – that hasn't changed because humans haven't figured out yet how to ruin that too. The sun is warm on my face as I glide through the air and hover there, directly in front of Miles. He is sound asleep but I love just being near him, looking at his familiar face.

I keep pace with him as he moves slowly around the oval. I know the people on the catwalk are watching me, but I don't care. Because I know what is about to happen, to all of these people, and that's why I'm here. They look so beautiful, so vulnerable when they're sleeping. They seem to look more similar, somehow. You don't have the sparkle of their expressions to catch your eye. I remain in front of Miles but I look at all of them, one after another, the ones that are near, and the ones that are far away. I'm filled with such feelings of tenderness for them.

Just before it happens, I wrap my arms around Miles and feel his warmth, and sense that he's vaguely aware of me too, deep within his dream. I know that if I hold him, I will fall, just like everyone else, but I'm prepared for that. In my dream, I understand—there is really no other way for this to end.