

Glass ceilings

“This way.”

She led him down the corridor, sleek, calm, firmly holding his arm, a faithful guide dog unwilling to let go. Her heels clicked off the polished floor. The lift had brought them to the top, 25th floor if he was right. Doors swished, tiles gleamed. “You will love the view,” she told him. He knew he would. “You deserve it,” she told him. “You have been waiting all your life.” He had. Maybe he hadn’t. His wife would know.

Her deep blue suit reflected the pale hue of almost opaque walls; her skirt hung tight around her waist, perfectly manicured, as clean and soft as the skin of his new office.

“Do you like it?”

He nodded. Of course he did. He walked over and touched the back of the leather chair dominating a discreet, but at the same time imposing central table. Fresh pine and leather hung expectantly, a dog expecting a pat, a quiet acknowledgement of loyalty and a job well done.

Carefully, gently, he moved around the table. The views were indeed splendid. Below him the city spun out in branches of colour, dour less as the traffic squirmed away floors beneath, silently, aimlessly while he gazed, a chess master dominating from above the folly. He grasped the heavy swivel chair, turned slowly and stared back into his office. He thought she had known about his vertigo. Maybe there was a perverse side to her gift after all. He held the furniture firmly, spine to the window, to the sights that would invade his spirit and leave him weak as hell at the start of every working day in his new office.

His wife waved. Her perfume lingered, a puff of expectation gliding like silk across the table and down his throat. He couldn’t refuse to return a smile, a hint of complacency, a rush of adrenaline.

He looked just fine she thought. Just fine. The part. Stomach correctly plump, shirt slightly tight, tie just loud enough to draw attention without losing respect. He deserved it. He'd been supporting her all her life, pushing her through the glass ceiling until she had become god herself. Now it was his turn. Besides, it was a sound business. She'd bought it for him, but she knew they were on a winner.

Her husband understood the calculation. She wouldn't have it any other way. He sighed quietly, fingers gripping the back of his new office furniture, avoiding the landscape behind. He could sense the city creep up his spine, unfold in shadowy mounts of towering blocks, shiny metal soaring inhumanly above the trees beneath. He swallowed. His throat went dry.

"I'll leave you to it then."

He nodded, flashed a grin, bathed in a grimace, a painful stretch mark dug out by the surgeons knife that left the skin too tense.

"I'll make dinner,"

"That would be nice."

She slid out the door slipping it closed with a well practiced clink. He could hear his secretaries wish his wife goodbye, adoring awe, worshipping smiles, puckered lips in hope of promotion, a quick raise, a moment of praise. They would have to deal with him now. Or maybe they knew they wouldn't: they probably suspected his wife remained boss, no matter who made the dinner.

He sat into his chair and wheeled it gently backwards until he could feel it touching the window. He let his hands slide behind its back until they were stroking the cool glass, holding it firmly, making sure it was keeping out the rush of heights. Sweaty palms slipped slightly but knurled fingers held on tight. He wasn't letting go just yet. He clipped the glass, held it tight, drew it closer into a velvet shield of comfort. Brittly, softly, it clung to his skin until the veins united and blood ran through the silvery blue twilight, the crystal clear pump of transparency his body was beginning to absorb, to need, to feed upon, a snowy addiction whistling up his nose, curdling his thoughts into a tingle of excitement.

Meetings blended into each other, a haze of well meaning advice cloaking snarled ambitions. From the young, lean, gym built bodies in the latest suits to the swarming paunches and closeting waistcoats, he recognised them all from before. Not the exact people, or their names perhaps, but the types. He'd spend his life surround by them, keeping them from his wife, encouraging them to support her while they both made sure she was promoted above all their heads. Now it was his own turn. They bossed sheepishly, scraped chairs gently, apologetically, fawned generously, and were endless careful to avoid dropping a hint of bad news.

But he was good at reading between the lines. He pushed his chair right into the window, shoulders brushing the glass, fingers reaching out to touch it now and again in comfort. He let them stare into the infinity that was the city beneath and just hoped some of them suffered from the vertigo he was madly trying to control.

He found himself doing it at home, sneaking up to the living room window, clinging to it shyly, allowing his long bent fingers stroking the slippery strength of silently steady panes. His wife glanced, cocked an eye, but put it down to stress of his new job. He would be fine. "Another whiskey dear?"

Leaning back into the wall became a habit, a calming trick of avoiding the view. Every morning he moved his desk a little closer to the wall: back to the city he could reach out and touch the glass and assure himself he was inside and in no danger of falling out. The board sat opposite, facing their own vertigo. He liked to watch their faces struggle into what sounded like rational comments while all they were really wondering was when they would be thrown to the sharks beneath.

They made comments, dangled charts. He nodded and sat, back to the window. He was mining out a comfort zone, creating a tsunami poised to drag them under, swallow them whole.

One night his leg stuck to the glass. They fused. Eventually he managed to shake it off , grasp his knee free but he was left with the strangest sensation of

having lost something, a limb, a sense of freedom, the ability to maneuver your body by your own will. Seaweed stuck to a cliff face, snout unable to drop from a nose, glass was beginning to surround him and create the most comforting prison he would have wished for.

Everybody got a bit worried when he moved a bed into the office and started sleeping over. His wife knew him too well to be jealous: there would be no rival but this over work was a little annoying and not quite what she had planned for their early retirement.

He spend the nights curled up in a crystal ball, cuddled up to the panes that shielded him from the city outside, the world beneath, hell itself. Mornings became more and more difficult. Sitting up was stressful: every muscle threatened to break their shelter, the protective glass covering what was growing around them, every vein stretch was a flood of poison threatening the crystal clarity of a glass cage. He insisted on cushions so that he hips wouldn't shatter with the abrupt movement of sliding off the bed and into his directors chair. He kept his fingers glued to the window for support, in case his strength sagged during the day. He had a special pillow arranged for his neck in case it snapped. He'd become so fragile. He could feel his bones twist into shards, long splinters of ice avoiding recoil. He watched his blood, tendons, flesh itself fade into the purity of liquid white reflection.

Slowly, everything became more transparent. Meetings, home, slotted into place and began to make sense: everything was suddenly cleaner, simpler, windows after been cleaned. Wrapped warm in soft blankets he prowled gently around the house when his wife was out, but stayed in bed when she was in. He couldn't touch her in case she broke through and shattered his isolation. Her presence frightened his fragility, the delicate weave of his glass cage.

His daughter came to visit. All concerned. He had forgotten they had time to create a daughter. During one of the election campaigns if he remembered

rightly: good move, the bump that romped them home through the winning post. Those flowing dresses were a real winner with the older folk.

Her hand glimpsing his hip, tinkling off the glass shade, failing to see through. He shuddered, wiggled out of touch. She could snap him in half. He scuttled into the shade of the curtains, the cooling calm presence of his window pane. She leans forward to kiss, he grimaces afraid her lips would turn to ice on the cold cheek his face had become.

Slowly, brittle white shining, blinding his eyes, afraid to move for fear of shattering, tingling into pieces spinning across the polished floor to hide in every crack and nook the office could provide, he was losing fear, turning to stare through the panes into the night, the day, the city that refused to sleep. He was melting, molding, smelting into the glass wall of the building itself. One morning he refused to even attempt getting up. He stuck there, metamorphosed into a spider on his own web. Safe, sound, stigmatified, clinging in space, another face on the pane but without the pain he had been suffering for years.

There was no past, just a frame for the present. His shadow had taken on a clearer edge, he now had a profile on the wall. Gleaming, transparently obscene, he no longer felt the necessity of building a shield: his glass frame provided a naked mirror of all that was to be seen. He clung, finally able to watch the city below without needing to vomit or fall out the window.

His wife sold off the firm and closed down the office. It was the last shard: she had tried hard for years. She would go back to her own career and let him stink away thinking he was a glass pillar. She had always been able to see through him, but had always thought she could keep the insight from him, keep him from himself.

She entered the hotel, the revolving glass door swirling automatically, following the determination of her pace. She paused for a second, caught her reflection in the darkened glass door. For a moment she was trapped. She bent her eyes, turned away, strode forward and the glass continued to turn and release her into another lobby, the illumination of another press conference. It was all crystal clear once more,.

