

Downsizing

When he was still Head of Department, back in the days when Policy and Evaluation still existed as a department, Martin used to like to hold forth on the future of work. 'In the knowledge-based economy, we will ask people to work "smarter" not "harder",' he would say. 'And until this old place catches on, it's heading for oblivion.' The words he forgot to mention, Julianne thought afterwards, were 'cheaper' and 'younger'.

After the Organisational Restructuring, perhaps because of the speed at which the security guards helped him out of the building, Martin left much of his library on management theory behind. Julianne offered to share it with Tom but he wasn't interested, so Julianne took the books home and read them in the evenings while her mother watched TV. Julianne found their language reassuring, uplifting even. In future, they said, organisations would disaggregate into a complex mix of profit centres, franchises, small firms and sub-contractors. Companies would retain a small core of permanent employees but most of those in work could expect to function as 'portfolio people', delivering services to a range of clients. Command and control management would be a thing of the past. She and Tom, Julianne discovered, had already arrived in 'computopia'. How lovely, she thought.

It was true that in the new era their work was far cleaner. Most of the information they needed could be obtained by e-mail and their reports were lodged in the same way. They did not have to waste time communicating with other members of their own department since there were none; and soon the names of other departments — 'payroll', 'press office', 'research and development' — ceased to conjure up a muddle of names and faces. They got a lot more done.

But it was lonely down in the basement. Sometimes Julianne would think about the old office on the fifth floor and how she used to watch the sun turn the river pale as paper at the end of the day, the way the glass buildings seemed to burn. Where they were now the only window faced a blind wall and the sun seldom found its way in to the room. The silence was punctuated at intervals by urgent liquid thunderings from the men's room on the floor above them, and through the wall behind her desk she could hear the crunch and grind of the lifts.

'I reckon we should approach them with a project,' Tom said after six months or so, when they'd begun to feel relatively safe again. 'We should offer to do a post-Restructuring audit, a kind of economic health check of the whole organisation. Otherwise they'll just forget we exist.'

Julianne touched the acupressure point on her neck and considered him thoughtfully. He was a small, neat man several years younger than she was. He had broad hands with moonlike nails, big ears, tiny eyes and fine teeth. He wore his fox-brown hair in a neat brush cut and his solid coloured shirts (pumpkin, biscuit, slate), buttoned up to the top without a tie. He was good at his job, Julianne thought. He had a knack of skimming through pages and pages of data, then coming up with small but startling insights. She was not particularly interested in men — they were all much of a muchness, as her mother said — but there was something very pleasant about Tom.

'You go and talk to them,' he said. 'You've read all those fancy books, haven't you? You've got the lingo.'



After the meeting, Julianne found herself running back along one of the endless corridors on the fourteenth floor, her feet clattering wildly on the parquet. She couldn't move nearly fast enough. At the first vacant office she came to, she went in and rang Tom's extension number.

'What's happened? What did they say? Where are you now?' Tom's voice sounded compressed, pared down to the essentials.

'I'm still up here on the fourteenth floor. Oh, I wish you could have seen their faces!' She slapped the flat of her hand against her thigh. 'If we play this right, we can have them eating out of our hands!'

'Is the meeting finished?'

'You can't see any of this can you?' She stopped and looked around her. She could see the river again: today it was choppy and almost black. 'It's quite extraordinary from up here. I'm in an empty office, just looking out, and oh my...'. Julianne laughed. She didn't feel like hanging up at all. She felt a kind of slow uncoiling of something in her veins.

She had always found it easier to talk on the phone. You didn't have to worry about arranging your body appropriately or how your face was behaving or where the other person's eyes were straying. You didn't have to worry about whether your breath smelled, or whether theirs did, or about any unwelcome invasions of your personal space. She settled herself on the empty desk. Her breathing slowed. She smiled, touched a hand to her neck again, and heard the rustle of her hair.

'What can you see?'

'There's a storm brewing,' she said. 'At the moment there's just the wind but the light is changing very fast and I think there's rain on the way. There are clouds coming in. Fat, purple clouds and all the time the wind is stirring up the sky. There's

bits of paper and leaves and birds being blown backwards. Everything is whipping about in the air: Everything is inside out and all over the place.'

There was a silence.

'You know what I'd like to do now?'

Still this crowded quiet on the line. She could hear his surprise and unease and excitement all coiled up together in the tightness of the optic fibre. 'What ...' He cleared his throat. 'What would you like to do?'

She laughed. 'I'd like to open the window and step right out into the middle of it all.'

'Don't do that,' he said quickly.

'I'm only talking,' she laughed. 'Stupid.'

When she got back to her desk she could feel him watching her but he said nothing about the phone call; nor did she. They started planning the audit project together as if nothing had happened. This must be what the books meant, thought Julianne, about manufacturing trust.



They designed and circulated detailed questionnaires to every department. They constructed a database and a statistical model, they broke the results of the questionnaire into inputs and outputs. It took them almost exactly a year. During that time, Tom and his wife increased the size of their mortgage and moved from a flat to a house; took package holidays in Greece and the Canary islands; and talked vaguely about having a baby but agreed they weren't quite ready. Tom had twenty-five haircuts (all the same), and visited his dentist once for a minor filling. He turned twenty-seven on the day they completed the last of the data entries.

Julianne took no exotic holidays, preferring to spread her leave across a series of short visits to friends (since her mother didn't like her to be away for long), but she did think about moving. She was nearly thirty and she longed now for a place of her own. She got as far as contacting estate agents before her mother's angina flared up again. Julianne had ten haircuts during this time (changing the style twice), eight sessions in a flotation tank, twelve Chinese massages to release stress and three visits to an osteopath about a stabbing pain in her neck (her teeth were perfect). If these appointments fell during working hours, she would always ring the office.

After a while she began to ring on other days too. Not carelessly, by any means. She rationed herself. She'd make herself wait until she couldn't bear to wait any longer. Then she'd run back up to the empty room on the fourteenth floor. 'It's me,' she'd say. And Tom would reply, 'I was wondering when I was going to hear from you again,' as if she was another person entirely. She loved that. Five minutes later she'd be back behind her desk and they'd both behave as if nothing had passed between them.

The picture that emerged from their analysis of the questionnaires was clear. They could see that, even after the restructuring, whole overweight sub-sections and divisions remained hanging on the organisation like ticks on a dog, sucking up money and time. The animal must be shaved right back to the bone, then they would see it move, sleek and lean and full of hurt, going in for the kill.

'This is going to blow their socks off,' Tom would mutter to himself as he worked on his section of the report.

Julianne was less satisfied; she felt there was something missing. At home she was irritable and distant with her mother, only happy when she could retire to her room and read her management theory books. Work, said the books, should be

reconceptualised as a pool that you moved to the centre of rather than a pyramid that you climbed. The aristocracy of the labour market would be the 'symbolic analysts' (consultants, planners, advertising executives).

Julianne began to have dreams at night where she saw herself walking down long corridors with jigsaw-like chunks of her body missing. Or she would be back on the fourteenth floor, and the head of personnel would say, 'We'll wait another minute or so for Ms Stack and then I'm afraid we'll have to start'; and it would come to Julianne in a horrifying flash that they couldn't see her because she had been disaggregated. Atomised. Deleted.

By day Julianne wrote and rewrote her section of the report, delaying the very last sentence for as long as she could. She thought of Martin's books: when you found yourself in a blind alley, they said, it was best to turn your back on the problem and do something entirely different: swim, climb a mountain, dive from a plane — then, nine times out of ten, the solution would come to you suddenly, easily, like an apple dropping into your hand. She'd switch off her computer, then, and run up to the fourteenth floor: 'It's me. Did you miss me?'

'Of course. Tell me what you see?'

'Today? Oh, today the river is the colour of...' Bananas, steam trains, the old Rover my Dad used to drive — she could sit up here and tell him anything and he would have to believe her. As she talked, she felt perfectly light and safe, and all her worries would be suspended by the limits of the line. But she knew also how tenuous it was, how easily it could be interrupted.

Tom tried calling once. He must have gone out to a payphone because she could hear the swish of traffic in the air around him. His voice sounded harsh and grating in her ear.

'I dream about you, you know,' he said. 'I dreamed about you last night.'

Panic rolled under Julianne's skin: all the way up her back and over the top of her head. She nearly threw down the receiver, but she made herself count to ten. From the floor above came the melancholy roar and hush of water in the pipes.

With great effort she kept her voice steady, 'You don't understand this, do you Tom? You're trying to force the pace, hurry us along to the punchline. But what if there isn't one? Hmm?' There was one of those dense, struggling silences on the line. 'You have to stop thinking in terms of ladders and pyramids and getting to the point. Think of this as a pool. Enjoy the moment. Swim, Tom, stop trying to climb.' She could hear him drowning out there, wherever he was. 'I'm hanging up now, OK?'

Later she went up to central admin. support and got them each a tiny matt black plastic mobile phone by way of compensation. 'In case of an emergency,' she said. 'We should be able to contact one another.'

'What's your number?'

She saw how he couldn't quite meet her eye, how his pen trembled above the page of his address book. 'No need for that,' she said. 'I'll make the calls'

He set down his pen.

She slipped her mobile in her shoulder bag, slung over one hip, he dropped his in the breast pocket of his jacket, watching her. She could see he still didn't get it.

'It has to be me calling or it doesn't work,' she said.

'Oh,' he said.



The next time Julianne stepped out of the lift on the fourteenth floor, she found everything swathed in dust sheets and the air heady with the smell of paint. Workmen in overalls were busy packing up for the day, stacking ladders and trestles against the walls, dumping rollers in tubs, sealing up big industrial containers of paint.

'What's going on?' she asked a man who stood wiping his hands on a paint-soaked rag. The smell of turps spread around him like an itch.

'Don't know love,' he grinned. 'We've got a contract to redecorate the whole of this floor. Maybe they're renting it out? Who knows. They never tell us what they want it for.'

Julianne walked down the main corridor with offices peeling off on either side. She stopped at the door to the boardroom where she'd pitched their audit idea more than a year earlier. It was like all the rest now: clean, featureless, gleaming white. She could almost feel the next wave of occupants piling up behind her, impatient to move in and make their mark. What work would they do here? Management consultancy, political lobbying, PR — jobs that left no residue, jobs you didn't have to wash up after at the end of the day.

From the lifts she heard faint clangs and shouts, then silence as the last of the painters left the floor. She walked on to the little box room at the end of the corridor. There was a single hinged window, overlooking the roof of the next building a couple of feet away. Julianne opened the window, leaning out as far as she dared to catch a splintered glimpse of the street.

Sometimes she toyed with the idea of applying for a job in a smaller place where she could be near the countryside and breathe fresh air. Her mother would go all pale and trembling when she talked like that. 'You always were like your father,' she'd say. 'Go on then. Go on. Walk away and leave me like this. I managed

once, I suppose I'll manage again.' But Julianne knew she would never do it. It wasn't just guilt; it was her love of the city itself. She liked the buzz, the anonymity, the competitive edge. If she put her mind to it, if they made a success of this report, there would be opportunities to move to a better job, something one or two ripples closer to the centre. She wouldn't really be satisfied with anything less now.

She reached into her little bag for the phone. 'Tom,' she said. 'Come up here a minute would you. I want to try out something. The fourteenth floor. Hurry.'



They took two great, solid planks from one of the painters' trestle tables and in no time at all they had built a bridge from the window where they stood to the roof of the opposite building.

Tom grinned: 'Now what?'

'I want you to walk across.'

Tom's face turned chalky with surprise. He looked from her to the window and back. 'Why would I do that?'

'How long have we been working on this report, Tom?'

'A year.'

'A whole year we've been buried down in that airless, lightless underground box of an office and you know what, Tom? We've gone stale.'

'What's that got to do with me going out on that plank?'

'Sometimes, when you're working really hard you go sort of blind, Tom. You lose your sense of perspective and you need to stop and walk away from whatever it is you're doing. Sometimes it helps to do something apparently pointless: hot air

ballooning, absailing. Take a few risks and suddenly you see things from a different angle. I swear, that's what the books say.'

Tom stared at her for a long moment. Then he reached into his jacket pocket for the little phone, clasping and unclasping it in the palm of his hand. 'I'll do it if I can make one call.'

Julianne felt her throat constrict, but nodded. It was a fair trade-off: one fear for another. He took off his jacket, then knelt and checked his shoe laces, hitching up his trousers so that they wouldn't get creased. Over by the window he stepped onto an upturned paint container, grabbed the window frame and hauled himself up on to the ledge. He crouched there for a long while, one foot on the planks, the other foot curled over the firm lip of the sill, both hands gripping the window frame.

'Go on Tom,' Julianne whispered, 'You can do it.'

He stood up, still holding onto the window frame but ducking his head out beyond it, keeping his knees still slightly bent. He edged his foot out a little way onto the planks, turning his body towards the open window. His shirt brushed the glass, his fingers clung and crawled along its metal ridge, his left foot slid further out on to the boards, till there was nothing but air beneath the wood. Slowly, slowly, still gripping the window frame with one arm, he pulled his body round till he faced the opposite building and his back was to Julianne. And she was struck suddenly by the frail physical fact of him. This is Tom, she thought, a bundle of flesh and blood and brain, a mass of raw human potential: flexible; suggestible; young; cheap; perfect.

'Go on Tom,' she whispered. He slid his right foot up to meet the left, his fingers came clasp-clasping to the end of the window and fixed on the right-angle, holding it like the knob of a cane. Julianne couldn't move, not even to suck breath into her lungs. She couldn't blink. She knew that if her eyes let him go, if she stopped concentrating even for a moment, everything would be lost. She was

reduced to nothing but this moment, this place, this body in front of her. He muttered something but the wind carried it off. His left foot edged forward, then he let go of the window and edged out of its reach. This is what it's all about, she thought.

'You can do this Tom.'

Suddenly he was crouching in middle of the bridge. He wobbled, then righted himself. 'Oh Jesus!' he shouted. 'Oh help me god!' but he was laughing at the same time.

Julianne frowned. What was he doing? He lurched, then righted himself, all the while fumbling for something in his shirt pocket. Another off-centre swoop and both arms flew out on either side of him. She saw the mobile in his one hand. He brought his arms in again very slowly. After a moment the phone rang at her hip.

'Hullo?'

She closed her eyes and imagined him out there, in the middle of nowhere: thin as a toothpick, air swirling round his ears. 'Tom,' she said. 'You're doing really well, but don't lose your focus. Keep looking over at the far side and try...'

He cut her short. 'This is my call, Julianne. I talk and you listen this time, OK?'

Julianne was silent.

'OK?' he said again. He took a big breath. 'This time I am going to let it all out: all those things that crawl around in my brain night and day and drive me crazy. Sometimes I think that everything I'm not allowed to say to you is collecting up in a huge ball of mucous in my throat and that one day it's going to rise up and choke me right there at my desk. Sometimes I think... no, I'll start with the dreams, sometimes, Julianne, Iwhooo!... Christ! What a *rush* this is. What a high...' he started laughing wildly. Julianne held the phone away from her ear. 'A shagging

great fourteen-storey high!' he was yelling. 'What a feeling. What an incredible feeling!'

Julianne looked out at the little figure teetering in the dirty afternoon air. She spoke softly into the phone again. 'Tom. This is serious. You must calm down. Concentrate. Otherwise you'll fall.'

'I swear,' he yelled, 'I'll never be afraid of anything in my life again Julianne. Oh Baby, when I get back in there I won't need a phone to say things I want to say to you. No! things are going to be different from now on, sweetheart. I am not going to put up with... Tell me something, did you try this stuff on Martin? Is that why they got rid of him? Or am I losing my sense of perspective? What the hell. What difference does it make. Let me tell you about my dreams. In my dream you're in this short green skirt and you're standing on a ladder just behind my desk and I know that if I turn my head...'

Julianne stopped listening at this point. She had a sudden flash of insight, just as the books said she would. She understood three things: (1) that Tom did not perform well under pressure (2) that she was looking at an image of the future: that this was the way their children and their children's children would work: without nets or props, nerveless and weightless and up against the wire; and (3) that her next job would be in some kind of management capacity. It was remarkable the way these three things simply floated into her head: complete and finished.

'...and you're wearing this really thin shirt and whoo...'

Julianne looked out of the window in time to see him lurch again. Both his arms flew out to right his balance, but this time the mobile phone kept going. Julianne followed its trajectory through the air: a high, sweet arc which was quite irresistible to the eye. Only when the phone peaked and began to plummet, did Julianne look back at the bridge.

For a moment she didn't move. Then she lifted a hand to caress the acupressure point on her neck. 'Oh dear,' she murmured.

Vicky Grut, © 1998 (3,800 wds)