

Spiders

by David Martin

Ten am, and the piledriver behind Rhys's eyes shows no sign of mercy. Beyond the safety glass, caverns of empty air tumble down and out to where the edge of the city is lost in the murk. The figures on the screen pulse and phase with the hideous internal rhythm of his stinking hangover. Bollocks to it, he thinks. He removes his headphones and looks around the vast open-plan.

“Mate, you look like shit.”

Rhys can only manage a grunt in response to Rich Walker. He may have initiated yesterday's ritual of post-work beers and grim speculation about who was next for the chop, but the horribly chipper Walker seems immune to hangovers. Rhys, however, had to get off the train two stops early this morning to barf in a bin, and only two espressos and a bottle of water have kept him upright through this first endless hour in the office. Calling in sick would have been a bad move. Only just scraping in for nine was risky enough with the axe swinging freely. Walker, mercifully, is distracted by something outside the window. “Now that's a bad sign”. “What is?” “Looks like the window cleaners have got the boot as well. Look at that big bugger”.

Rhys has no idea what he's on about until he sees the thread stretched outside the window at the end of their row of desks, twenty-three floors up. A dark blob is crawling outside the pane, articulated legs shuttling along the filament which sways heavily under its weight. He notices two more spiders static and observant at the top of the glass. And he sees more of the web now, the larder of flies stuck and trussed in it.

“How the hell did they get up here?” Walker asks. Rhys has no idea and doesn't want to think about the sheer cliff of metal and glass the spider is steadily traversing, or the air currents that pluck at those fragile threads. He gets up and heads for the kitchen, feeling the building heave in great queasy waves. He's not surprised the window cleaners have got the boot. Everything is falling apart,

mirroring the company's fortunes. At least two of the lifts are permanently out of order, any kind of cleaner is a rare visitor.

The windowless kitchen is dangerously close to Niall's office, but feels more stable, away from the vertiginous edges. The odour of stale milk from within the fridge doesn't help but Rhys braves it for the sake of the cup of tea that is rapidly becoming a matter of life and death. He roots about among the half empty cartons, marked with the usual warnings to the light-fingered. He wonders if this same scene is repeated in every office of every organisation everywhere in the world, however prestigious, however feared. There was probably a pathetic fridge exactly like this in Hitler's bunker, Goebbels's semi-skimmed angrily labelled "Hands Off!".

When Rhys returns the spiders have crawled up out of sight. He can see now that the web continues all along the side of this floor. The hot tea begins its damage control work.

* * *

Homeward bound, knackered but knowing he is under an hour from the blessed collapse on the sofa, Rhys knows something's wrong the moment he steps off the underground. The dynamics of the crowd are all wrong, too much disorganisation in their movements for the usual disciplined rush of expert commuters turning in formation.

His suspicions are confirmed, the emergency warnings are flashing and the overground station is shut. Another bomb scare.

Emerging into the open air, the crowd jams pavements and spills into the road, hailing predatory taxis. Police vans hoot their way through, a handful of fluorescent jackets try to direct gouts of humanity spurting out of the city's ruptured systems.

He hears it first, the unmistakable sonic signature of something bad happening.

First a muffled shout, then a thud of impact, hard momentum on bone, the sound of a body being broken, in that minuscule window of time before the screaming starts. An engine accelerates hard and he feels the car's shockwave through the air. Horns are sounding, there are shouts for help. The fluorescent jackets pass at a run.

The crowd hangs back, making space. The road clears around the man, deadweight on the tarmac, his face upturned, his eyes frozen at the instant of registering the car accelerating deliberately at him. Everything hangs suspended for a moment then collapses into a swarm of voices.

Rhys finally gets home to silence. He'd barely noticed his journey through the sprawling southern suburbs, the final tram ride; all the way the dead man's open eyes and shattered, useless limbs fill his exhausted mind.

The story of his day goes unspoken. Ruth hasn't returned. Everything is exactly where he left it, which he thinks may be the strangest thing after years of sharing space with someone else, their unpredictable activity and their unknowable motivations. He can't even smell any lingering trace of her, though her books still fill the shelves and all around him the dust is their mingled skin cells. He takes out his phone but can't bring himself to call.

He wakes once in the night and feels dread crawling like tar. He'd dreamt of hanging from that great glass and steel cliff, fingertips white with strain wedged into the frictionless crevices between the panes, nothing beneath his feet but the shattering drop.

* * *

It is dark behind the glass, the city a sea of orange sodium light, refracted in the overcast. Rhys is at his desk, virtually alone in here. He's on the night shift, showing willing. The numbers don't sleep, the data entwines and powers the world outside, carrying messages of billions won and lost. The office takes on a bunker-like quality, the apocalyptic glow of the city reinforcing that hallucinatory tiredness of people who will next see the sun when it climbs back around from where it's currently driving sweat from the armpits of yelling traders on the dealing floors in Hong Kong and Tokyo.

As far as anybody understands it, this company used to be some unremarkable support function spun out from something that used to be a bank - something that is now lurching on in a zombie afterlife while slowly collapsing under the weight of its own impossibility, the shockwave deflected through mazes of dummy companies and

offshore accounts, but still unstoppable. Its current ownership, and that of the building itself, is hazy. It produces fragments of software for a project whose purpose no-one can quite remember. Maybe, somewhere out there, it will be one of its own long-forgotten subroutines, labouring to impose rules on to chaos, which finally notices the company's anomalous existence and terminates it.

Rhys feels like he's traversing the dark side of the moon, a trillion tons of frozen rock cutting him off from the world. At night, at least, all the options of the day are closed, and merely making it through the long haul to morning feels like an achievement.

There was a guy who used to work at the desk next to him. Lyndon, a thirty-something divorcee, who Rhys grudgingly admired for his convictions. He openly hated work and had as little to do with anyone as possible, in case he was sucked in and it did him permanent spiritual damage.

Then, about six months ago there had been a pronounced change in Lyndon. He seemed agitated, you could tell he was listening in to people's conversations rather than studiously ignoring them. At times he seemed on the verge of saying something then drawing back.

Rhys occasionally tried to make small talk, and, as ever, his efforts were met with curt, functional responses. But Lyndon's eyes were desperate. Soon after that, he stopped coming in. Rhys later found out from a guy in HR that he'd been sacked after a stash of pornography had been discovered on his machine.

No-one knew what had happened to Lyndon. Rhys suspected that whatever the one thing had been that set him scornfully apart, a lover, a circle of friends, whatever he was secretly writing in his garret, had gone horribly wrong. His own defensive structures now imprisoned him in a vicious spiral of decaying confidence. He got lost.

Rhys wonders what had become of him. He imagines Lyndon staring at the ceiling of his bedsit, paralysed by his own fears, his world contracted to four walls.

* * *

“Ballooning” says Walker triumphantly. “Eh?”. “Ballooning. That's how the little bastards got there. They put out some silk like they were going to make a web. You get a massive updraft off a building like this so if you get it right you can float as high as you like. You'll probably end up dead. But if you land in a good spot, that draught keeps bringing all kinds of little insects up. Those lucky sods outside just sit there getting fatter and the food just keeps on coming right to them. The internet, mate. It's not just for porn, you know. Bloody hell you look rough.”

Rhys, hungover again, recoils from the lattice of over-familiar faces.

There is no disguising it. I have nothing to say to these people.

The clarity of the thought cuts through the blood roar and headache fuzz like shards of glass falling from the twenty-third floor.

Rhys feels the day's tension, and the tension of the days before that and back as far as he can remember, pour off his body like dark shapes clicking and scuttling. Sweat breaks out under his stiff new shirt. He can feel himself collapse into a swarm of buzzing black dots.

Outside, however the colony had made it to this height, that tough little ecosystem was still thriving in the cracks of the building's carapace. Rituals hardwired since the Triassic had turned the window into a remarkably effective death factory for lesser lifeforms which, captured and wrapped, awaited their turn for dismemberment, dissolving in acid secretions and a slow pitiless devouring.

One day there'd been about ten spiders, the next only three big ones. Perhaps some dispassionate battle for supremacy had ended in cannibalism. Or maybe the weaker ones had only been defenestrated. Perhaps they'd floated down to ground level to begin the slow and steady climb back up for a revenge served stone cold. “There'll just be one huge one left”, jokes Niall. “One huge bastard that's eaten all the others up.”

Niall's left his office to come and wander aimlessly around the depleted floor that he used to believe he ran, staring at the spiders

and trying to make lame conversation with the remaining staff. This is worrying in itself.

Rhys can't handle Niall's doomed presence, so he heads for the increasingly feral gents' loo and locks himself in his favourite cubicle. And how sad is that, he thinks, to look forward to a few moments' solitude between MDF partitions, the plastic seat leaving its imprint in your pallid arse cheeks, your colleagues straining and farting a few inches away, the muffled airbursts and splashes. Rhys gazes down at his shoes between his bare thighs. Then the lights go out.

Only for a few seconds though. They flicker back on before causing anything more than a few theatrical squeals and laughs to filter through from the office.

He smiles, amused by his own momentary sense of excitement. That pretty much sums things up, he thinks.

* * *

No-one saw Niall go, but his office stands shockingly empty, blinds wide open, stripped bare for a couple of days. Finally Louise, a rarely-sighted regional manager, painfully groomed and gym-tightened in a world of beer bellies and bad shaves, appears with a couple of nervous, shiny young men of indeterminate function and summons the survivors. She enthuses fearfully about the opportunities ahead, the new investors, the new boss they've sent in to shake the place up.

The next day, the blinds are shut but watchful, the new boss's presence fills the room, but he or she does not venture out.

Rhys keeps his head down for a few days, cutting down on the booze. At home he even occasionally sleeps in his own bed rather than falling asleep on the TV-lit sofa in the early hours. At work all conversations are snatched, clockwatching exchanges. Fear and worry is a constant background hum like faulty air con or the wi-fi finally starting to microwave your grey matter. Hardly anyone wants a pint and if they do the conversations are punctuated with long stares into space, eyes seeing bills, mortgage demands, children's faces. And sometimes they're seeing as though for the first time the

desolate estates that surround the building's footprint, which the commuter trains sweep through without stopping.

Leaving the office late one evening, Rhys notices the window cleaners still haven't been. The pattern of webs has grown increasingly complex and the sinking evening sun is making it more visible; the summer that he'd barely registered is collapsing into autumn. He wonders if he'd be cut out for a career dangling from a cradle off a skyscraper and shivers at the thought.

One filament of web is shining almost gold in the sun as it heads away from the building at a strange angle. He realises it points out into the void of air towards the neighbouring tower, hundreds of metres away. He strains his eyes to follow its track, but can't for more than a few inches. Then he notices there's another. There are several shining tracks heading out at the same angle, into that impossible gulf. He stares for a while at the other tower. He imagines it suddenly flaring silver beneath a net of webs, an outpost of a hidden city that stretches from tower to tower unseen from the streets below, built from threads trembling with complex codes of vibrations and chemical signatures, reading the air currents, humming with its own inscrutable data.

As he makes his way from the tram stop he sees the car parked up on the kerb, boot open, his front door standing open. Ruth's back is turned as she loads a last cardboard box. A man Rhys hasn't seen before is emerging from the door, locking it. Rhys steps into the shadows of a shop doorway. He watches them stand together as the man shuts the boot, something conspiratorial in their stance says they are the new centre of a story whose murky fringes he's already being relegated to.

He remembers waiting for Ruth one evening, years ago, in the shopping plaza beneath her office tower. He'd sat on a low metal bench at 5pm, watching people steadily being extruded from the doors beneath the company logos, a wave front that rapidly built up and rushed towards him, breaking either side at the last moment, a sea of black and grey, patterns recurring, faces like computer-generated extras in a film. And he remembers seeing her the

moment she emerged from the doors, standing out in all that rush. She was walking slowly, breaking the pattern, in that moment unaware of the surging crowd, looking only for him. The car door slams. Rhys ducks quickly across the street and into the off-licence.

* * *

He feels a deep sense of relief, of surrender to the inevitable. When he steps into the open-plan, unshaven and ashen-faced, people avoid his eyes or exchange the briefest apologetic smiles. Even Walker doesn't ask where the hell he's been for the last three days. The summons is sitting as expected at the top of his stack of unread messages. All eyes follow his back and then duck sheepishly as he walks the length of the room and into the new boss's office. The door closes quietly behind, shutting out the rubbernecking stares and fearful whispers.

The gloom inside is thick, the blinds down. What little light oozes in is swallowed by heavy curtains on all sides, made of some kind of tangled material. The air is dusty and ancient, chemical and alien, fetid and organic at the same time. It is something quite unlike the air-conditioned and deodorised smell of the building.

Rhys becomes aware of a shape moving behind the curtain, the material stirs but he can't make it resolve into anything meaningful. Now a scratching sound rises all around, white noise that somehow becomes a voice, a voice without any clear source. It is matey RP, its tone chummy condolence, but those inhuman sounds and odours don't just underlie it, they somehow seem to constitute it. "Rhys. Good to talk at last. Name to a face. Unauthorised absence. Serious matter. Tough times for everyone. Concerns. Dreadfully sorry to tell you this, mate."

That vast dark shape swells closer to the curtain, pushing against the thick ropes of matted, twisted filth. The voice continues but that undertow of chattering, shrieking noises from all around now rises until only fragments of sense are discernible.

"Commitment. Time and motion. Skillset. Workflow. Competitive advantage. Thought leaders. Market makers. Did you see the match on Saturday? Human capital. Human resources. I've got kids myself.

Evolve. Strive. Feed. Rebrand. Restructure. Regret. Never did me any harm."

Rhys glimpses his own face reflected in a dark pool of an eye. Two eyes. Then four. Pressing intently through those dense, fetid rags of web. A shapeless moving, dripping cave of a mouth.

"Options exhausted. Regret. Lieu of notice. Evolve. Feed. Grow. Redundant. Sadly. Compete. Evolve. Strive. Feed. Grow. Regret. Regret. Regret."

