

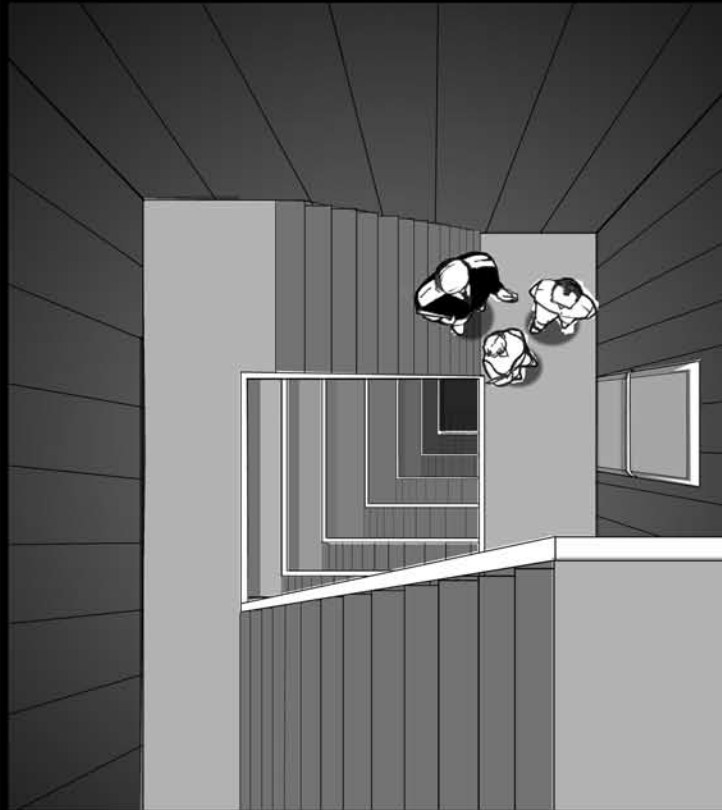
Employee Performance

Story and Graphics by Sharon McGill

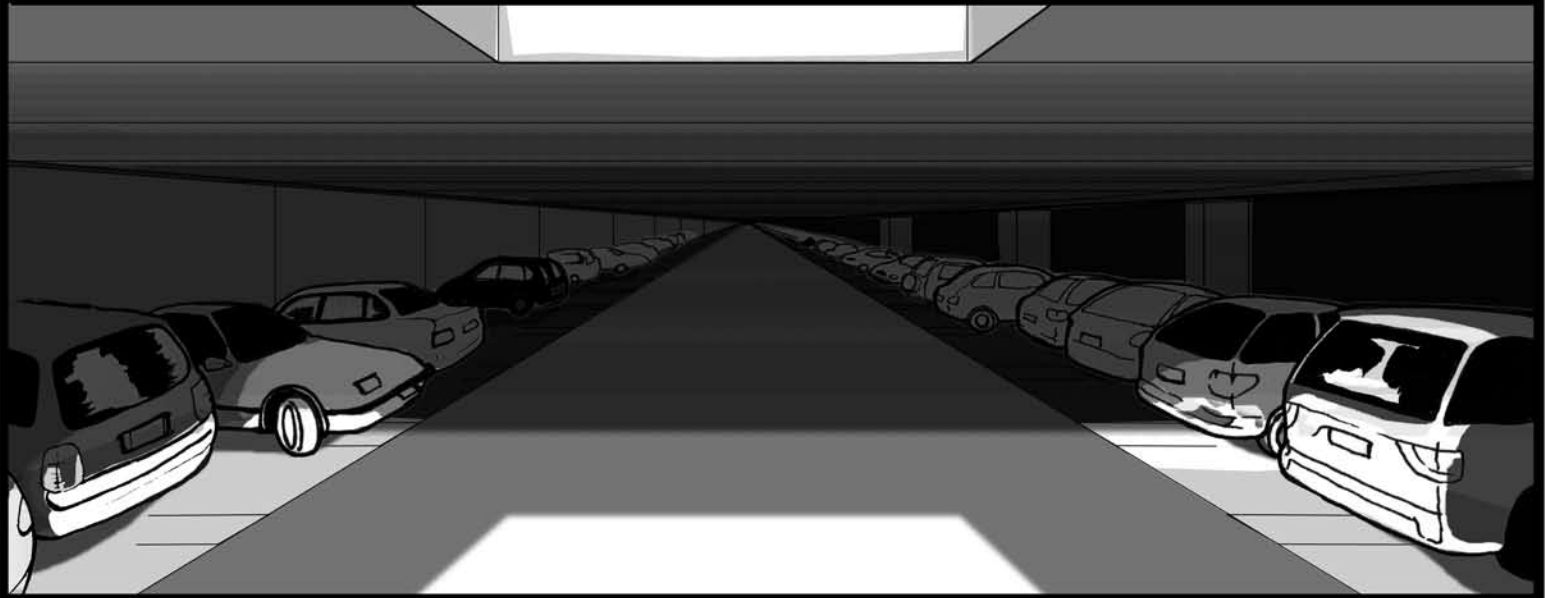
Employee Name:		
Department Name:	Job Title:	Position #:
Performance Review Period From: _____ to _____		
Overall Rating: ___ Consistently Exceeds Expectations	Review Type: ___ Annual ___ Special ___ Probationary ___ Recommend permanent status	

I was in the stairwell when I heard the story of the guy who killed himself here.

Dave told me all about it. He's worked for the company forever and knows everything about his job, my job, and the company. He's also the guy who told me about the woman who spit on the CEO when her department got canned and the man who held the Board of Directors hostage.



"It was the other stairwell, the one nobody uses," Dave said as we plunked down the cinderblock well, our steps echoing flatly off its gray walls. "That one is open to the outside, so when it rains, they get water down in the garage."



Laura, another co-worker, thought it strange and inappropriate to kill yourself at work.



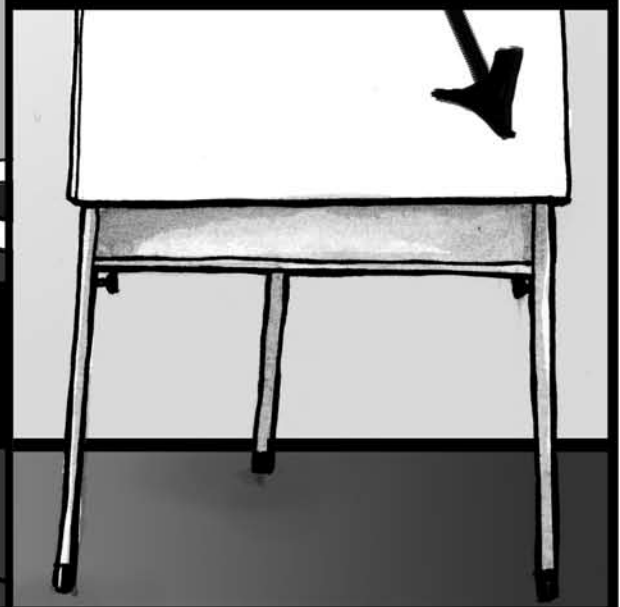
"Why would you do it that way? Why not with pills, at home? I would much rather die at home with my cat than here with my boss."

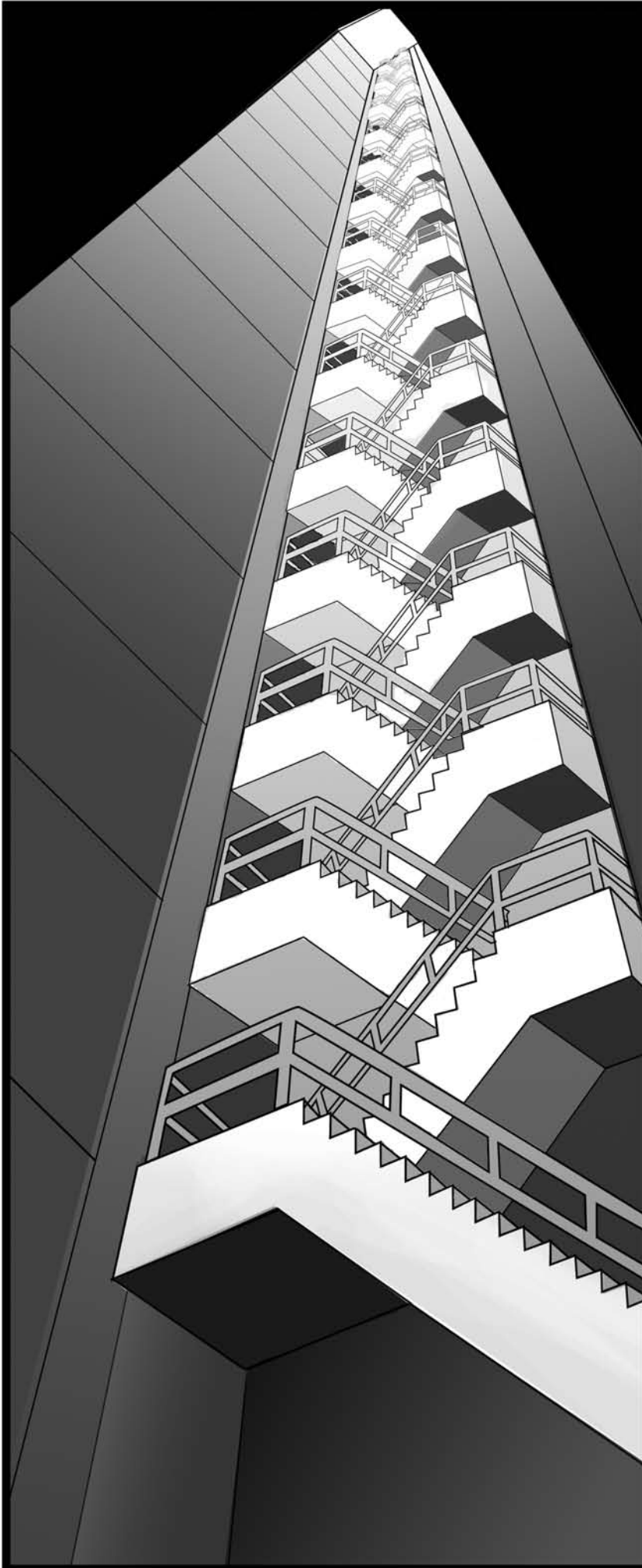


I told to her what Dave explained to me—that the fellow had just been fired or laid off the same week his wife left him, so he had lost everything: love, job, 401(k). What else is there?



"Some people crack," I said.





I then continued with the realities of such a situation—how one generally dies of a heart attack first, seconds before ending up on the pavement. “It couldn’t be that bad. You won’t even get the panic of the ground rush because you’re already dead.”

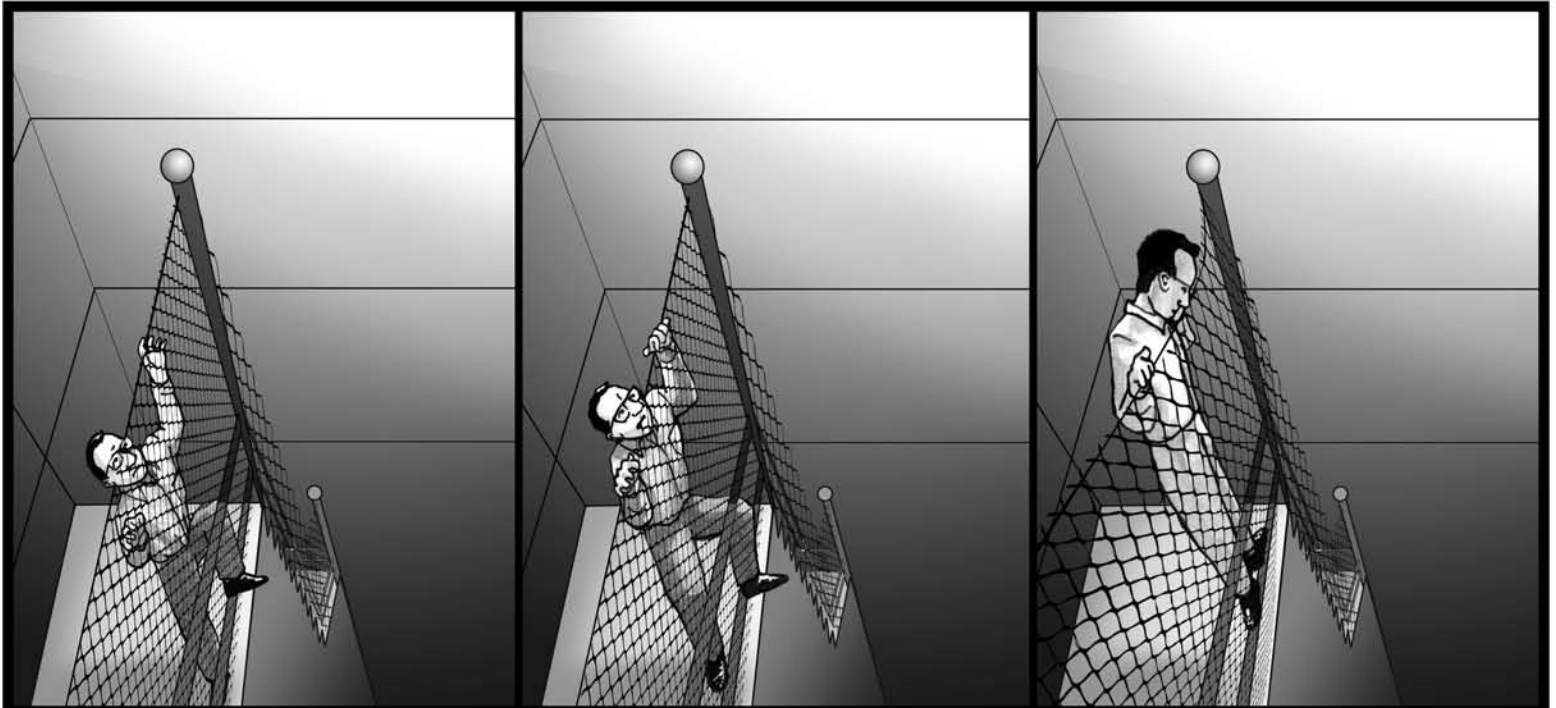
Laura stared at me in silence, and I realized her comment had been a joke.

The next time I was on the thirty-second floor, I slipped out the west exit to the open stairwell. I found myself on a small landing from which I could look up and see the company flag flapping hard against a flat, white sky. And there it was: a shaft running parallel to the stairs shooting down into the underground parking lot. A tall, chain link fence separated me from the long drop, something I could tell had been installed after the building was constructed.

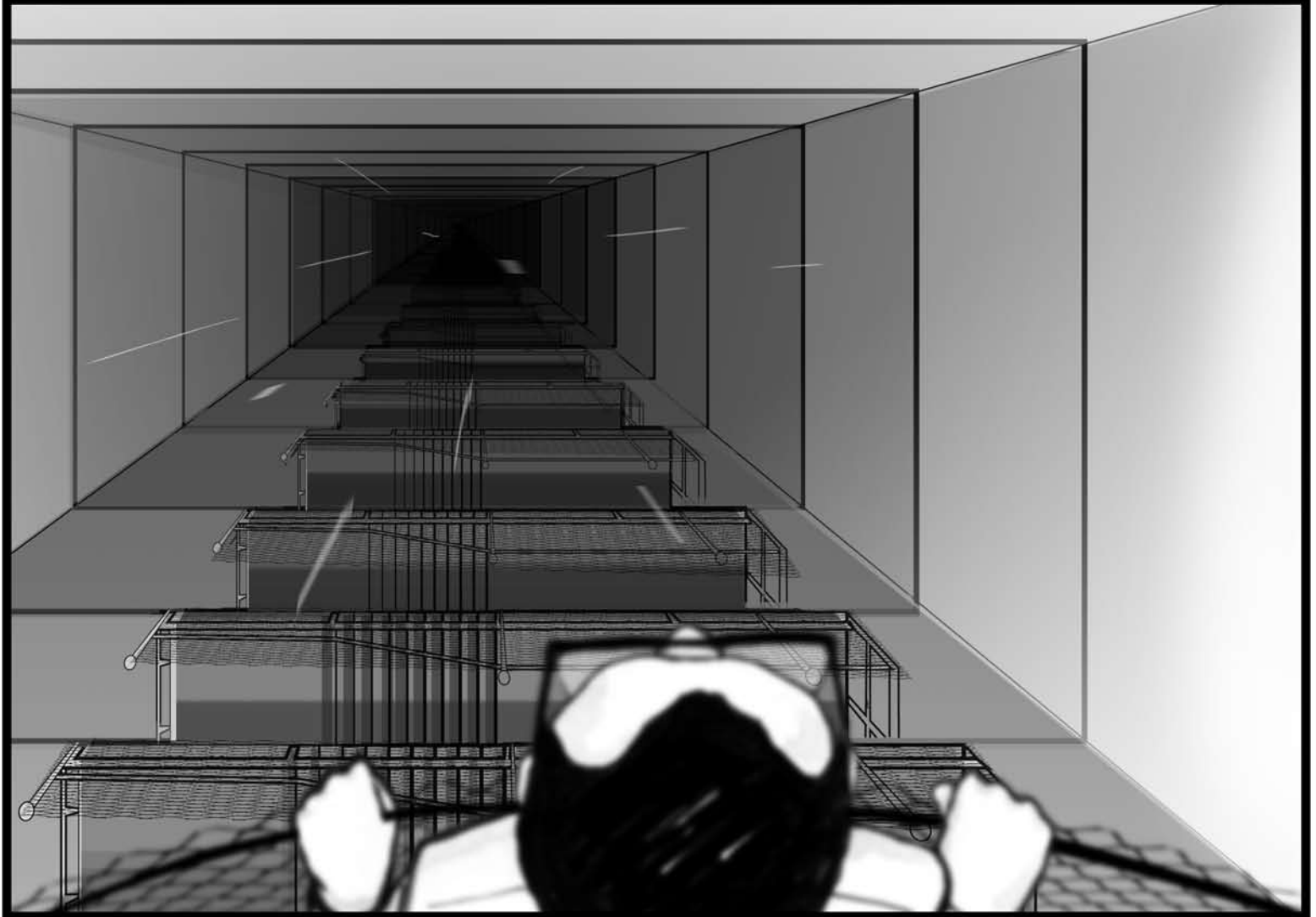


In front of the chain link, there was only a four-foot guard rail, so before the arrival of the fence, one could presumably peer down the shaft and lose one's glasses.





In my case, I had to climb the fence to study the trip down. Placing my foot on the steel bars, I grasped the top of the chain link and hoisted myself up. The well was a dark shaft of cement walls gradating light to black, all the way to the garage in the bowels of the building. Hovering there, I watched a few drops of rain shoot from above and disappear. The only sound was the whipping flag and distant scraping noises from the garage. My weight made the fence bend outward.





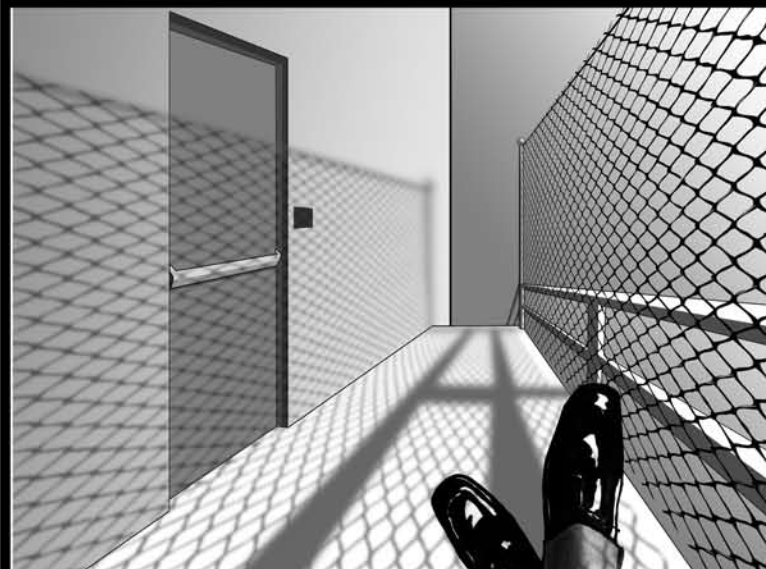
The following day I began taking my lunch out there. I liked the enclosed feeling, the sense that something significant had happened in that space.



Sometimes I brought a book to read, other times I sat and ate or didn't eat.



There were days I wasn't in the mood for lunch.



Other times, I would come when I needed a minute away from my desk to be in a place where I didn't have to look at anyone.

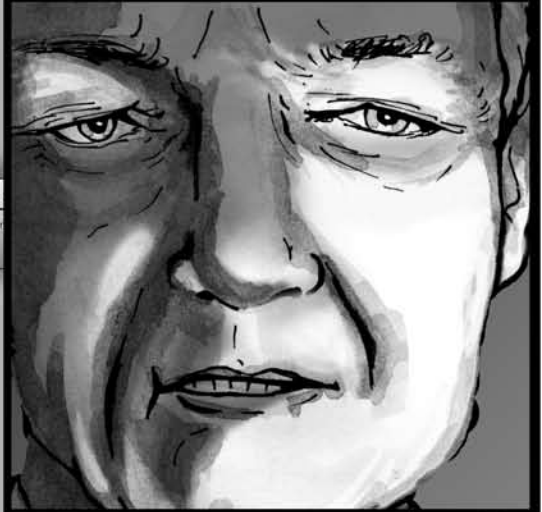


ATTITUDE

ATTITUDE IS A LITTLE THING
THAT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE



Geoffrey
Senior Director



ATTITUDE

A week or so later my manager, Geoff, called me into his office. He kept the fluorescents in his room off because they bothered his eyes, so the only light was his computer screen and a desk lamp.

"Everything o.k.?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good, good. That's great."

I studied a toy on his desk — a magnetic pedestal with a pile of thin, iron hearts on it that could be bunched up and shaped into three-dimensional forms.

"Anything you want to share with me?"

I fiddled with the hearts, built them up, then tapped them down.

"Not really."



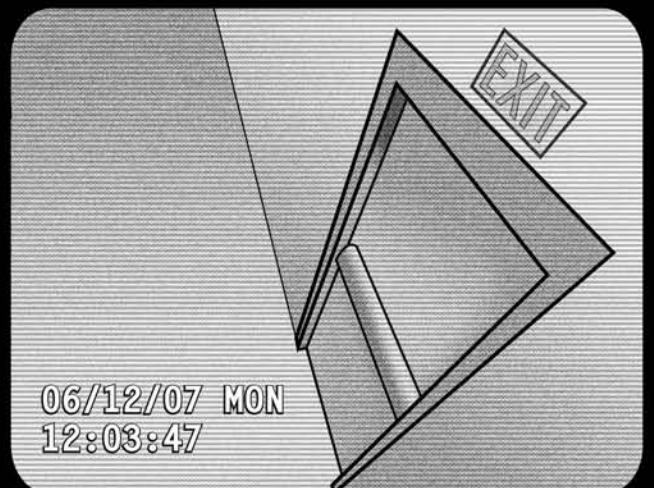
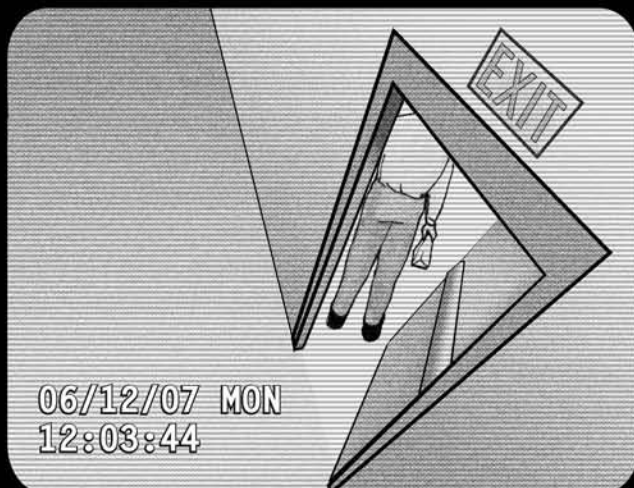


"We've noticed your trips to the top floor. The security cams captured you heading to the outside stairwell, spending time out there. It's not a safe place, you know."



"I didn't realize it was off-limits."
"Facilities will take care of that. Just FYI."

"Oh."
"We don't want anyone getting hurt. You understand."



"Of course."

Geoff then continued with some pleasantries and lauded my work. I left a little while later.

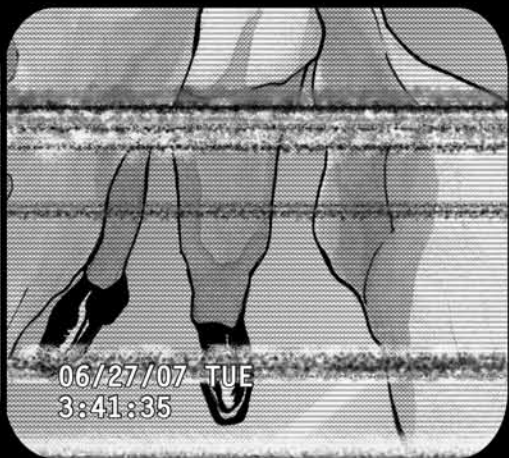


I hoped no one else had heard about my trips outside. I didn't want to be one of those people, like the woman on our floor who sobbed every morning in an empty conference room. Or the guy who stood by the water cooler for an inappropriate length of time, not looking at anything or talking to anyone, just staring at the wall as if it were a person he didn't like.

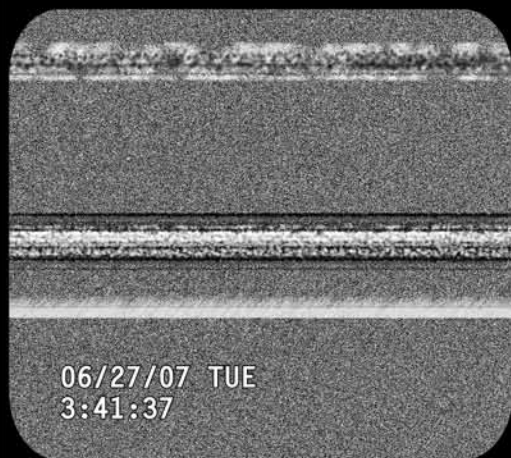


Several days after the meeting with Geoff, I went to the thirty-second floor for my lunch break and saw a sign on the west stairwell exit.

**DANGER!
EMERGENCY
EXIT ONLY!
DO NOT OPEN
ALARM WILL
SOUND!!!**



And I thought about that guy, the suicide. Up until this point I hadn't much considered much why he did it here. It seemed obvious.



But I now realized that losing his job, his wife—that wasn't it.



He did it to remind those of us watching and listening that when you don't feel the falling, your heart has already stopped.