

# THE HIGH-RISE DIVER

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Imagine the world.

Imagine the globe, as it floats in space.

From your vantage point, the world is round and smooth. Savour this symmetry, imagine that it exists only for you. Close your eyes for a moment, take a deep breath in and out, and when you open your eyes again after a few seconds, take a fresh look at Earth.

Now zoom in a little more. You can discern flaws in the uniformity of the Earth's surface, elevations and depressions. They create a soft, wave-like relief, the changes from red to blue to brown produce a mottled pattern.

As you get closer, a silver speck emerges from this earth-coloured pattern. What you see here, still far away but steadily approaching, is a city. It glistens, because it's constructed from steel and glass, you can see that now. The city lies below you like a secret wanting to be uncovered. You can keep zooming in, don't be shy, you're entitled to take a look.

It reassures you to see that the city, too, follows the laws of symmetry, its buildings pursue an architectural style and are arranged geometrically, in rectangles or star-shaped formations. The skyscrapers that appear almost like filigree extend into the sky side by side and are indistinguishable from each other.

The city spreads out underneath you now, an almost infinite sea. And yet it has an end, a limit, back there, where clouds of dust and exhaust fumes climb into the sky. Does it have to be like this, you wonder, the beautiful city disfigured by the sight of dirt, why does it have to end anywhere, anyway? But can you imagine the sea without the beach, or the cliff or the pier? No, without peripheries, without its repugnant outside, the city would – as it is right now, shimmering in the orange afternoon light – be only half as beautiful.

Concentrate on the city's centre. One of the skyscrapers exceeds the others by several dozen floors.

Around the building, there is a divergence of colour which at first appears to be a case of chromatic aberration, but then, as you zoom in further, proves to be matter, moving, alive. Between the houses you make out a teeming throng, heads crowded together, a multitude of people. It vibrates, the heads move, and then you see what the crowd down there is waiting for: on the roof of the towering skyscraper there is a glittering thing.

In close-up you realise that it's a woman in a silvery suit. It's a Flysuit™, which clings to the shape of her body and makes her appear almost naked, every curve of her well-trained body discernible.

Regard the woman's face. What a face, you think, how symmetrical, as if one had created only one side of the face and then mirrored it. It is a young face, you estimate that the woman is perhaps twenty years old, at the height of her beauty, the body taut, eyes wide open. Look carefully at these eyes, you won't discover any flaws, no redness, no clouding of the iris, no uneven diameter of the pupils, instead there is sharp focus, concentration. What you see is a competitive athlete at work. This woman's every muscle is under control. If you asked her to describe the feeling in the big toe of her right foot, she'd be able to do so with maximum precision.

Just then, a jolt passes through her body, she moves towards the edge of the roof, it's time. Perhaps you'd like to move away a little now, out of the close-up, and open your eyes to what lies beneath her. The trench between the buildings, a thousand metres deep, an altitude of exactly one thousand metres, that's how it is determined in the global High-Rise Diving™ association's guidelines.

As the woman steps to the extreme edge of the flat roof, the spectators hold their breath. She glitters ethereally in her Flysuit™. The people on the ground, as well as those in the boxes in the building across the street, right up to the Skybox™, are stretching out their arms towards her.

What they're experiencing is euphoria made flesh, pulsating between the houses. Close your eyes. Let yourself become infected. Go deep inside yourself, right into the fingertips, notice the beating of your heart, how it unfolds throughout your body.

When you open your eyes, the woman throws herself off the skyscraper, head first into the depths.

At first you are terrified. Your body contracts, as if it was falling into the depths together with the woman.

But then you see the diver fly like a bird. You sense her absolute certainty, that she will break the fall.

You follow the falling body, stay close to it and see how it revolves with utter precision, first horizontally, then vertically, arches itself into a ball and extends again, in split seconds. A moment later the ground comes into view, you hold your breath, she is hurtling towards it and threatens to slam into it, you can almost feel the tarmac, burning-hot from the sun, when her body suddenly shoots straight up, lifted by the Flysuit™'s

flight mode, triggered at the last possible moment, a split second before impact, and you hear air streaming from the people's open mouths, a collective exhalation.

The crowd applauds, the diver shoots like an arrow into the sky. In her flight she smiles, the weightless one, into the cameras.

Imagine the sensation that this woman is experiencing, falling into the depths in the unshakeable faith that she will fly up again. Without fear of a crash, of annihilation.

You relish this triumph over gravity, death can no longer harm you.

Weightlessness – what a feeling. What a sublime feeling.

Now distance yourself again, zoom out slowly, softly, without wobbling, so that the motion remains pleasing to the eye. Imagine that the body keeps lifting and dropping between the houses, even when you can no longer identify it as a body, when it's only a speck in motion and then a dot, which could be a pixel error, and then nothing at all, as you zoom out and once again see the globe floating in space, even and still.

Imagine the body in its infinity, immortal, its rise and fall uninterrupted, like breathing, like a heartbeat, make the most of this thought, find refuge in it, draw confidence from it. Now, at this moment, as you slowly retreat from the world, there is no death, only life.

# 1

This is how I see Riva today: playing with a plastic spinning-top, like a child. Legs braced, upper body leaning forward. I hear the sound of the top permeate her flat, a monotonous humming. Then the top falls over on its side. Her hand reaches for it, I see the hand, hear spinning, humming, silence, spinning, humming, silence, in an interminable loop.

I ask myself whether one could describe her playing as compulsive. And how she got her hands on the toy. Perhaps it's been revived by some lifestyle blog, a fad which will be over again in a few months.

I see Riva's long, white, stretched-out legs. The summer dress is sticking to her body, her chest shining with sweat. *Refusal to turn on the air conditioning*, I note down, and, in the comments column: *self-mortification / evidence of feelings of guilt?*

The image is overexposed. The neighbouring houses reflect sunlight through the wide windowpanes. I adjust the brightness of the screen.

The sound of the top is droning in my ears. I feel slightly nauseous, and a cluster-headache's starting up around my right eye. I concentrate on my breathing to fend off an attack, in and out.

The picture on the screen becomes blurred. Ice cubes clink against the side of my water glass. I hold it against my forehead and let the condensation run down my nose.

The weather forecast for the next three days: heat, no rain. Air quality index bad, pollution levels high.

Condensation runs down my cleavage. I put the glass down to replenish the ice cubes and start the game over again, forehead, nose, mouth, chest.

Suddenly there's a piercing alert. I search for the tablet on my desk. It's flashing mutely. The sound isn't my sound, it's coming from the screen's speakers, slightly over-modulated. I swing the camera away from Riva into the room, till I spot the tablet on her coffee table.

Riva doesn't react.

After twenty seconds she starts imitating the tone, she's beeping away like a machine.

My temple is pounding, I turn down the volume control.

Your stress hormone levels are too high, Master said. You have to take better care of yourself. Meditation, relaxation exercises. Conscious breathing. Avoid any excessive noise.

On the screen a door opens. Aston's in the doorway. He races to the tablet and presses the touch screen. The beeping stops. The muscles in my neck relax.

'You can damn well turn it off yourself!'

I make a note of Riva's posture, averted, her reflex action of pulling the legs in close towards her body. *Defensive position*, I write, and, in the column for further investigation: *Evidence of domestic abuse?* Data analysis has so far not produced any indication of this.

Aston turns on the air conditioning. At the window, he raises his camera and looks through the lens down into the city. I haven't seen him in the flat without a camera since the start of the project. He wears it on a strap around his neck, so that it sticks out like a lump on a level with his stomach.

Aston seems most vulnerable when he's taking photographs, most himself, the moment so intimate that I feel almost uncomfortable watching him. His mouth tense behind the camera as he focuses, half-open, and then the relieved dropping of the corners of his mouth once he's taken the shot.

Under observation, the living-room radiates outwards, fraying at the edges. To maximise the space Aston has set up partitions with digital picture frames at right angles to the wall. Continually changing images, like adverts endlessly repeating on a taxi screen. There's something narcissistic about how he makes the precious communal living quarters his personal exhibition space. Every night before he goes to bed he uploads new photographs. Images from the last few weeks: always the same high-rise perspective, ant-sized heads and cars like toys, taken from a bird's-eye view in a variety of formations. In my first daily report I'd suggested that it was an exercise in empathy. An attempt to put himself in his partner's shoes, whose only remaining connection to the outside world is the look out of the window.

In the centre, on its own partition, Aston's magnum opus *Dancer\_of\_the\_Sky™*, four 32-inch digital frames in a ten-minute loop. It's the series of photographs that made him famous overnight, four years ago. Images of Riva in at the point of leaping off, Riva in the air, extended between the houses, the body precisely aligned, her arms

stretched out above her head, hands together, like a ballet dancer. Her body silvery and glittering in the Flysuit™. Aston manipulated the reflection of light between the skyscraper walls during exposure, so that the background burns out around her. A bona fide superhero swooping from the sky.

The regular clicking of Aston's shutter release blends with the sound of Riva's constantly reset spinning-top, rhythmically contoured fields of sound, almost melodious. An inadvertent interplay.

I log the effect in another column. With the increase in the amount of data, there's also a proportional increase in the need for marking schemes, for a system that'll facilitate analysis. Only once sufficient information has been obtained will it be possible to determine what's significant, subtle fractures and discrepancies, the underlying structures, the interior mechanisms.

It's a little like factory work, this first step, the recording of the everyday. My observations repeat each other at intervals as regular as those between Aston's photographs in their frames. Riva on the floor, Riva with the top, Riva sweating in the sun. Aston coming in from his studio and regulating the temperature.

'That was another summons, you know,' he now says, holding the tablet aloft.

From my report I gather that two days ago he already said exactly the same sentence, word for word. I ask myself which sentences I repeat every day without knowing it.

Aston has put the tablet aside and is holding the camera pressed against his chest. He uses the other cameras only as back-ups, if that. This one is a vintage model, produced about twenty years ago. Aston's financial transactions indicate that he bought it three months ago from the second-largest online reseller.

'You pay a fine every time you fail to respond. We'll pay until there's nothing left. And then we'll pay in other ways.'

Riva pretends not to hear him. She reaches for the top, so that Aston has to talk over the sound of it spinning.

'Aren't you afraid that your muscles will degenerate? One day you won't be able to get up any more. It happens more quickly than you think.'

Riva shrugs and reaches for the top, interrupts its motion and resets it. I, too, am worried about her body's rapid breakdown, the speed with which her muscles are wasting away and she's losing weight. Since the breach of contract, Riva has refused

the compulsory medical exams, she no longer wears her activity tracker. There's no way to ascertain her fitness levels, but it's obvious that they're getting worse each day.

'Your body needs vitamin D,' says Aston, his tone slightly changed, more caring, insistent. 'More natural light.'

I'm impressed by his readiness for action, the patience with which he dedicates himself to her daily and tries to get closer to her.

'It's in the vitamin water,' says Riva, her face turned away.

I nudge up the counter of the sentences she speaks on a given day. Till now there's been no sign of a fundamental improvement in her willingness to communicate.

Aston has disengaged himself from his position by the window without my noticing. He is standing about a yard away from Riva, then slowly walks around her. He considers her from all sides, lays his head to one side, crouches. Then he starts taking photos of her.

'I've an idea for a new project,' he says.

Riva's hand reaches for the top. It slips too early from her fingers, and spins only briefly.

I watch the change of mood in Aston's facial expression, impatience, evident frustration.

'Just because you decide to ditch your career, it doesn't mean that I have to lose my job now as well,' he says. 'You're jeopardising my life, too.'

The sound of an alarm penetrates from outside, police sirens. For an instant I don't know whether they're coming from the speaker or through my office window.

It's suddenly quiet in the flat, Riva has left the top lying where it has toppled over. She looks out of the window, her eyes seemingly focused on nothing in particular.

I hear Aston breathing loudly and quickly, three, four times. There are moments such as this, during which he briefly loses control and anger comes over his body, impatience. The muscles in his face are strained, his body tense.

Then he calms down, lets his shoulders drop, raises his arm to touch Riva. He strokes her slightly hunched back with his index finger, along the spine.

'You're too thin. You can see your bones.'

Riva doesn't move.

In my comments column, I note: *passive behaviour, Karnovsky takes on the role of an object.*

'Come on, Riva.'

Aston reaches for her shoulder, shakes it lightly, but loses courage at her immobility, unable to stand it for long.

He turns away and goes back to the window, picks up the camera hanging by his stomach. The familiar clicking echoes through the room, they've both returned to their positions, backlit, more silhouettes than people.

I lean back and watch them, my target subject and her partner, framed in a rectangle on the live screen. My work screen next to it, a chat window flashing, on the desk, also flashing, the tablet, under the table a discarded flat screen, ready to be picked up.

I click through the video files in the archive. The analyst has uploaded four recordings of Riva's and Aston's flat from the time of Riva's breach of contract, obtained from private sellers. Four data files from the past four years, each recorded on the first of August, when they were testing the security systems in all the flats in the block.

I open the most recent file on the work screen. On the live screen I adjust the position of the camera so that both show the same section, a long shot of the flat under surveillance. Screen next to screen, the backdrop nearly indistinguishable except for the addition of a few partitions with Aston's photos.

First there are several hours of archive footage of the empty flat. I fast-forward, and only the angle of the light changes. The security camera's automatic aperture adjusts the brightness. Wandering shadows of furniture on the smooth designer floor.

At about seven p.m., Riva enters the flat in a tracksuit. She drops the sports bag, goes to the kitchenette and runs the tap. She tests the water's coldness with her index finger and then washes her face, strips off the tracksuit down to her underwear.

For a moment she stands in the room, oblivious to anything.

Then goes to the fridge to get herself a drink. Liger™, a sports drink. One of her sponsors.

She sits at the window, looks down from the sixty-fourth floor. Her body is perfect in all respects, the spine straight, the skin gleaming and smooth. She undoes her ponytail, her hair falls over her shoulders, shiny in the evening light. The security footage is almost identical to a clip from an advert. Everything is right: lighting, positioning and model.

Riva is sitting at the window in her pale-grey sports underwear, takes a sip from the bottle, gazes down. She's probably going through the day's training sessions in her

mind, recalling unsuccessful and successful manoeuvres, the new dives. The footage ends when Aston comes in through the door that connects his studio to the living room. He sees his partner, raises the camera and takes a shot. Riva, hearing the sound of the shutter, glances at him over her shoulder and smiles. I've failed to find the photo in Aston's archives. I jot down a note to my assistant, instructing him to look for the photo again, a screenshot of the footage attached.

I would have liked to have observed Riva in those days. Watched her as she trained, the movement of her muscles under the taut skin, the power and skill of a well-honed body.

I was six years old when I went to see my first High-Rise Diving™ show. I remember my excitement as we emerged from the bus two by two, my whole body trembling and tense.

It was my first excursion with the talent-scout programme. A glimpse of the future, should we be so lucky. A Motivation Trip™, meant to inspire us to great things. What do you want to be when you grow up? A high-rise diver. To run the risk of falling in order to fly high, like our career advisors said. The closer you are to death, the more alive you become.

We had cheap tickets. No box, just standing room, down on the ground. Still, we weren't far from the Fall Spot™, the space they'd cordoned off on the ground, which the divers were meant to get as close to as possible. I hadn't yet seen the videos of accidents then, of mechanical failure. Blood-spattered spectators, sight screens sliding up from the ground, people in orange suits made of water-repellent material.

Then, there was only anticipation. Squeezed in between adults towering over me. The smell of sweat, the smell of the herd, which was new to me and unexpected.

From the ground you couldn't see the diving platform, far above. At least I was able to see a section of the screen through a gap between two men, showing the event from different camera angles.

I felt sonic waves course through my body. The spectators, cheering as the first diver appeared on the platform. We stretched our arms up into the air in unison, as far as we could.

Then the shock, as the diver dropped down, plunging with unbelievable speed. The falling body, as it steered directly towards me. The glare of the suit, the diver's fingers spread out, my relief as she soars up, an inch away from the ground.

Our collective exhalation and then her rise, to thundering applause.