

**The Cubicle Giant**  
a novel  
Seth Sawyers  
[sethsawyers@gmail.com](mailto:sethsawyers@gmail.com)

**Part I**

**Rachel**

1

Rachel Rubens had been employed by *The Sun* for twelve days. She had no business cards, no nameplate for her desk. She was blank. Her beat, technically, was arts and architecture, but she knew little about architecture and was only passable in her knowledge of the other arts, so, in practice, she had covered whatever the editors had told her to cover. She had gotten three contributor attributions but only two bylines of her own, one of which was a 14-inch story about a fire that had destroyed a vacant Westside hotel twice slept in by President William Howard Taft. Neither made the front page of their sections.

She was 26 and new in every way. She regularly took wrong turns downtown and found herself on some mean, four-lane concrete thoroughfare that invariably took her away from her interview and dumped her into one of the blown-out neighborhoods in East Baltimore. But she worked hard and had not missed a deadline, though she had already turned in a story in those first few days that was just beyond her actual ability. In the newsroom, she felt as if she were behind the wheel of a car that was traveling fifteen miles per hour faster than she would have

liked. She still couldn't believe that she was there, with a phone and with unlimited access to the slim reporter's notebooks stamped with *The Sun's* masthead. She couldn't believe she now occupied a little rectangle in the huge newsroom of a metropolitan daily, and that she hadn't yet been found out as a fraud, and that no one yet had discovered how tenuous she felt even when only standing, how getting up in the mornings had felt like something she was not strong enough to do. And, always, the stutter was there, like a very awake small woods cat in a cage, eyes locked onto the tiniest of movements.

The city, strange, brutal, hard, loud, was also a salve. It was so new to her, the speed, the noise, the buildings and cars so close together that she couldn't help but be distracted by the density of it, the thickness, the human humidity. She was so new and scared of failing that she had little time to dwell on how much her chest hurt at night. So far, she'd been too tired to drown. The morning the call came in about the sculpture atop one of the downtown buildings, Baltimore was not yet Rachel's home, not even close, but it was instead something to which she clung, the cloud into which she rose so that she might not be seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was intimidated by the daytime city editor now walking toward her. Mike Goldsworthy was intense, not someone who responded well to weakness. She was intimidated by nearly everyone at *The Sun*, except for the arts editor, a kind, tired woman named Roxy who had once been a children's book illustrator. Mike Goldsworthy was a life-long newspaper guy, a man made of wire who rolled his own cigarettes and kept an espresso machine in his office. He was perfect with grammar, impatient about mistakes if you were on deadline, and able to read and pick apart a 40-inch story in minutes. As he approached her, she tried to remain calm.

"Rubens," he said, sitting on the corner of her desk.

“Mike,” she said. It had taken an effort to say his first name.

He stared out over the Jones Falls Expressway, to the east. She stared along with him, though she did not know what she was looking at, other than the blocks and blocks of low, dark houses, the occasional steeple jutting up sharp like a dirty icicle, the famous hospital looming like a castle in the middle of it all. He sighed. “So I got a guy telling me there’s something we’ve got to see downtown, on top of the NationsBank tower.”

Rachel opened her mouth, but Mike talked before she could begin.

“Downtown,” he said. “Tall, but not the tallest.”

“On the water?” she said. She’d felt the stutter, the tip of it, but she didn’t think he noticed.

“Charles and Lombard.”

“Right,” Rachel said, though she’d not heard of, nor noticed, any building that fit that description.

“I don’t know what exactly is going on,” Mike said.

“Any idea?”

“Not really, Rubens,” he said.

“Thanks, Mike,” she said.

She grabbed her purse, a notebook and pen, and her 35-millimeter. Reporters at places like *The Sun* weren’t supposed to take pictures but it was a habit left over from the *Times-News*.

“Am I turning this into the city desk, or Roxy?”

Mike, walking away, raised a hand, and said, “Worry about that later. I don’t expect much, or even if you’ll have a story. But this cat is weird. He’s the tall guy.”

She opened the notebook. On the first sheet of paper, she wrote: “*Tall/roof.*” She changed into a pair of flat shoes she kept in a drawer, another habit she’d picked up, from the only other female reporter at the *Times-News*, the schools reporter named Jenny who loved horror movies.

Outside, she was glad she had worn a skirt that day and not pants. The heat hit her like a breath. On the walk downtown, she wondered what Mike had meant about the guy being weird. She had already met plenty of weird people in Baltimore—warehouse musicians who composted their trash and whose instruments were power tools, painters who paid for bar tabs with murals, otherwise normal-looking Orioles fans who made art out of used chewing gum. She figured that this man must be something like that.

She found the right intersection. There it was: a tall building, more or less like all the others. She should learn more about architecture. There, though. She thought she noticed a flash of something, on the roof, that didn’t belong. But it was windy that high up, and the heat seemed to be playing tricks on the light, so she couldn’t be sure.

The lobby was shiny and refrigerated, like a supermarket without food. There was a store where you could buy greeting cards. There was a shoe shine stand, a Burger King, a Chinese all-you-can-eat, and a bank branch. Just this one building had maybe a quarter of the stores in the Country Club Mall back home. She took the elevator all the way up. The twentieth-floor lobby was empty. She didn’t know where to go, but she checked the doors in each corner—each one marked “No Entry”—until one opened. She felt, in that moment, like an actual reporter, or like someone who was trying to be one. There was a short stairway. At the top of the landing, she pushed on another door, and it opened. There was a blast of light, and heat. She shielded her eyes with her notebook.

The wind hit her, whipping her hair around her face, into her mouth. She should have brought her sunglasses. She realized she'd left her only pair in Cumberland. She didn't know where, or at what, she should be looking. She was sure she was trespassing.

She came around an enormous, humming machine and there stood, by a great margin, the tallest human she had ever seen. He was a tree, a small building, on top of a building. He had to be walking on stilts. He was unbelievable. He was smiling.

The very tall man had regular-looking shoulders, and arms, and wrists. He was incredible. She wanted to be near him. She wanted to look at him.

She held out her hand. "Rachel Rubens," she said. "*Baltimore Sun*." There was the stutter.

The tall man bent toward her. It happened slowly, as some terrific and sad dinosaur might bend to drink. She thought he might tip over and crush her. He extended his enormous hand. She shook it and her hand was lost inside his.

She stared. How had she never heard of this man? He was about her age, and so far polite, tired-looking, not exactly handsome. He could have been a high school teacher. She tried to talk, but the stutter showed up as it hadn't in weeks, right where her tongue met the roof of her mouth, like a wall of dried glue. She thought her face might explode. She thought she might cry.

A woman appeared, with security guards, all of them shouting at Hawk. Rachel would have to do it now. She would have to get herself together. She would have to earn her paycheck. She knew enough about security guards to stay away from them. They were, for reporters, things to get around. She tried to give herself some time, so she rounded another of the huge humming machines. There was a tall wooden thing. She didn't know what she was seeing, only knowing in

her stomach that it was something remarkable, and strange, and temporary. Already, the wind, which was not particularly strong, was making this thing dance.

She fumbled for her camera, found it, and dropped her purse to the roof. She checked that the flash was on, which she'd need since it was backlit, cranked the film-advance lever, and aimed. She held her breath, for she didn't want to mess this up like she'd messed up everything else and, just before the men on the walkie-talkies got to her, as the hot downtown wind picked up, she pressed the shutter-release button, and there was a flash, and with that photo, with the words she'd put to it, she knew she had it, and after that she knew that it had been all right that she'd stuttered so badly, and that she'd cried. She knew now that she'd been crying the whole time.