

Interlude 1

The company that occupies
the first through fourth floors of the building
has a secret name.

This name is never spoken aloud
and almost never written down.

A few people have seen its syllables,
at night, in confidence.

The name glows a fiery gold when looked upon.



Those who see it are
said to be changed forever.

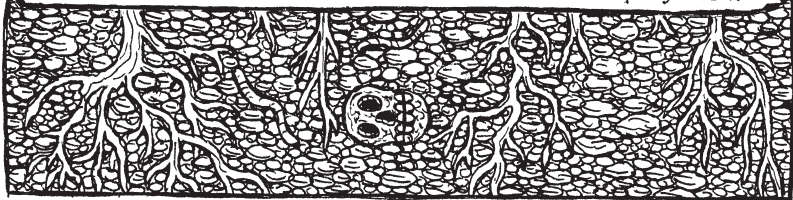
Some leave the building immediately.



Others rise so fast in the company that they ascend to the fifth floor
and few ever see them again.



The secret name of the company is older than the company itself.



It will remain long after the company is gone.

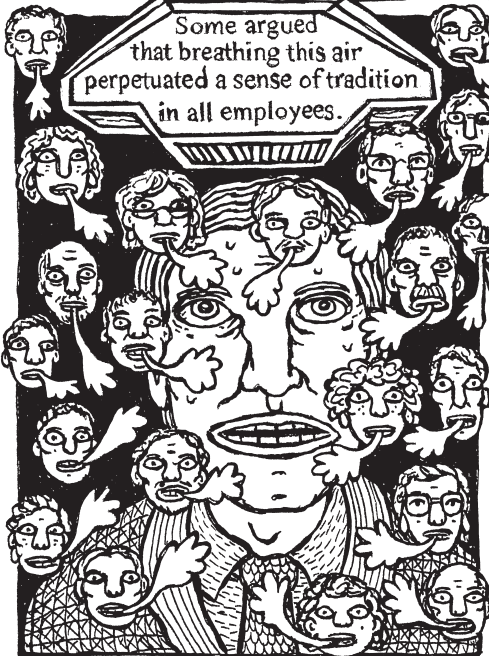


The office building had miserly vents and faulty air conditioning.



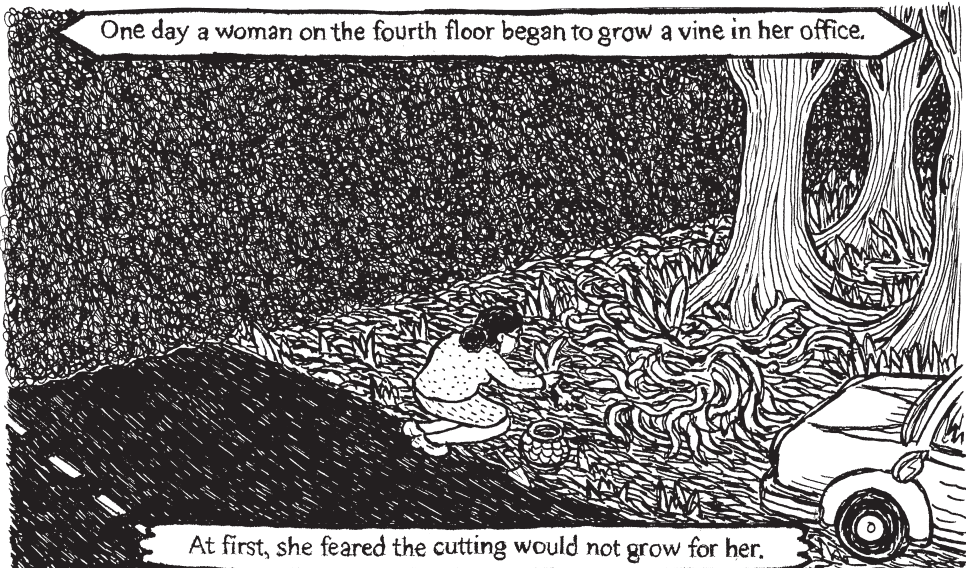
The inhabitants of the building breathed air that their predecessors had breathed years ago.

Some argued that breathing this air perpetuated a sense of tradition in all employees.



Most said it made them ill.

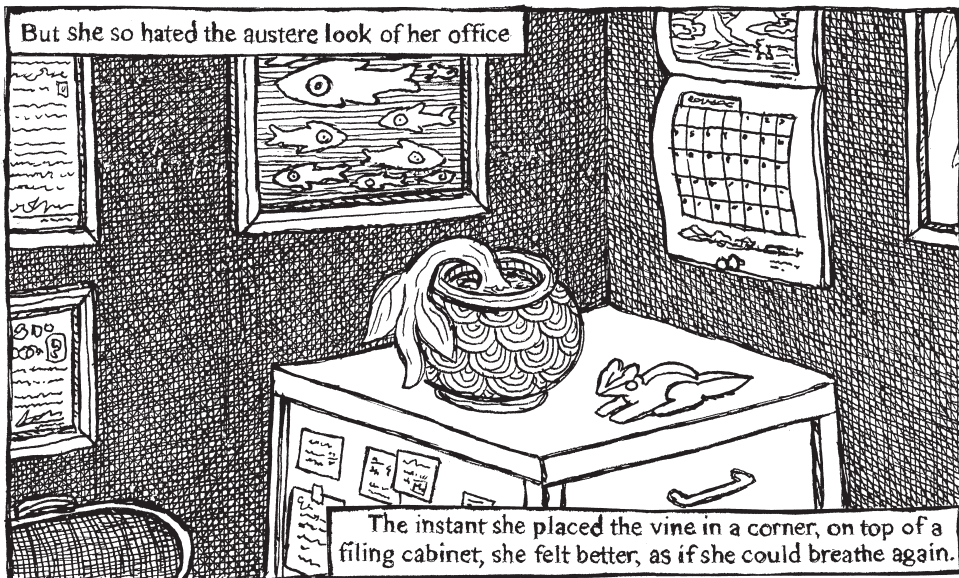
One day a woman on the fourth floor began to grow a vine in her office.



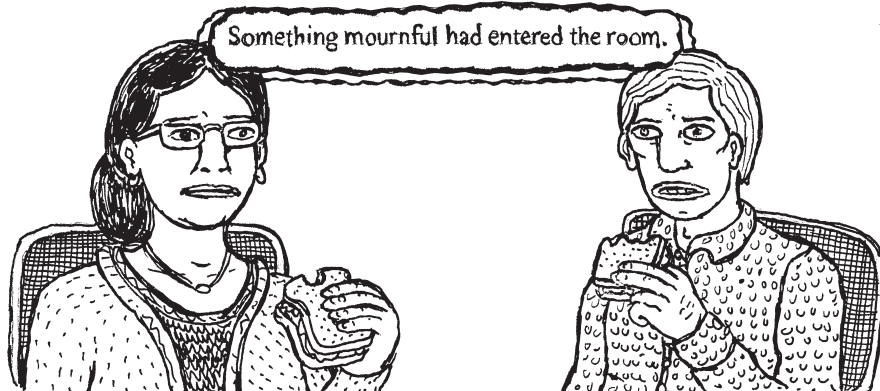
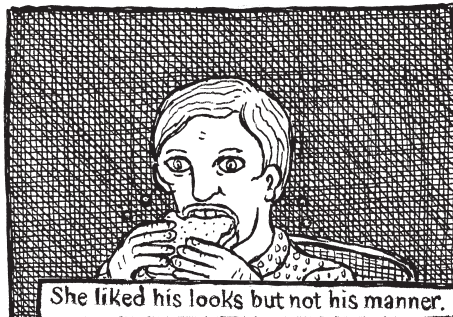
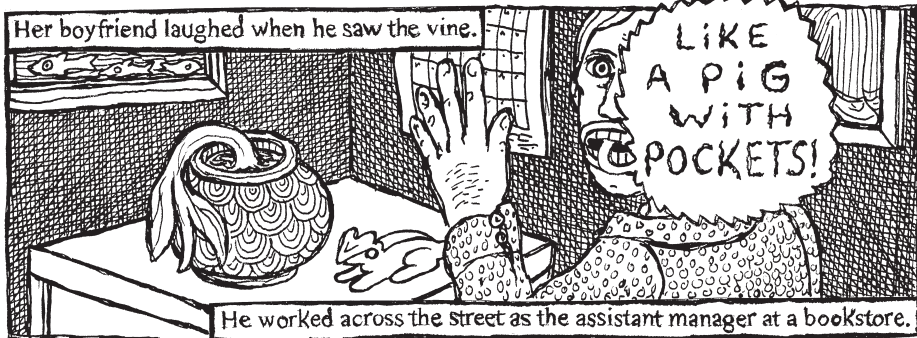
At first, she feared the cutting would not grow for her.



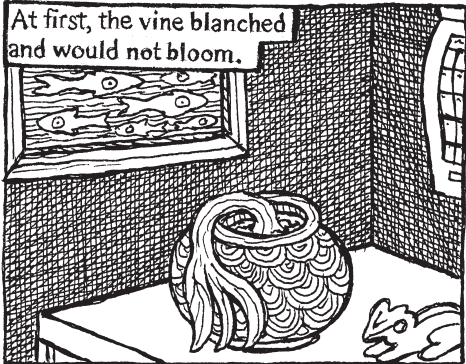
But she so hated the austere look of her office



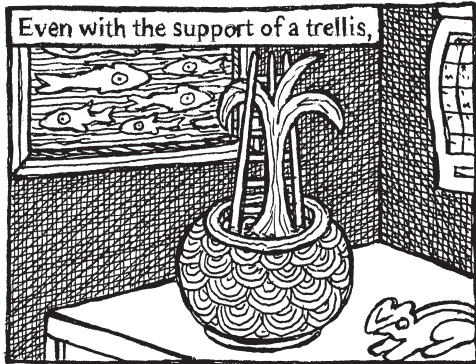
The instant she placed the vine in a corner, on top of a filing cabinet, she felt better, as if she could breathe again.



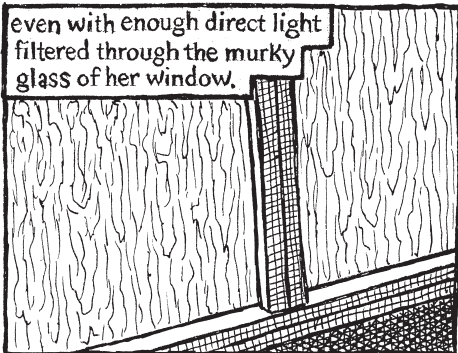
At first, the vine blached and would not bloom.



Even with the support of a trellis,



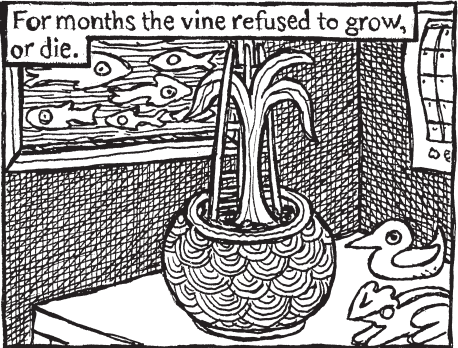
even with enough direct light filtered through the murky glass of her window.



She felt guilty, gave it more soil, added fertilizer.



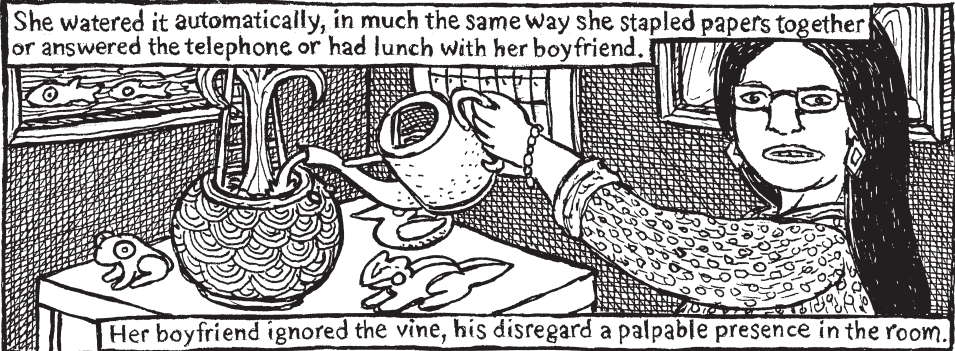
For months the vine refused to grow, or die.



The woman forgot about the vine.



She watered it automatically, in much the same way she stapled papers together or answered the telephone or had lunch with her boyfriend.



Her boyfriend ignored the vine, his disregard a palpable presence in the room.

But one day, in the spring, she entered her office to a new smell, a fragrance unfamiliar to her.



Perfume? Air freshener? No.



It smelled vaguely of honeysuckle, of fresh berries, of vanilla, but wilder, more pungent.

