

John Lanchester

di Mr Phillips

DA :

TRATTO
(2000)

Mr Phillips looks at his watch, a silver-plated Omega with roman numerals which his father gave him as a present when he passed his charter exams. When Mr Phillips took the watch out of its box and looked up beaming to thank his father, the older man, with his arms crossed, merely said:

'There.'

At the time, that had seemed a perfectly natural thing to say; or at least Mr Phillips had felt he understood it. Now he sometimes looks at the watch and remembers his father's single word and wonders whether it meant *there*, that's the whole business of present-giving discharged – or *there*, you're a grown-up now, you need to be on time – or *there*, the days of exams are behind you – or *there*, you'll never again look at the time without remembering your father. Perhaps it really had meant, I'll be dead one day. There are times when he looks at the watch and is overcome by a recollection so acute that he can feel the stubble on his father's chin as he embraced him, and smell the slight sourness of pickled things on his breath. And at other times he just looks at his watch and thinks, Oh it's five to two.

Now, though, it's five past ten. The working day at Wilkins and Co. will be well and truly under way. When Mr Phillips was younger he had liked to be as late as was possibly consistent with keeping his job, and had been voluptuously reluctant to get out of bed. These days he likes, or liked, to be at his desk by nine fifteen, or half past at the very latest; he enjoyed setting off to work while still feeling a tad groggy, with wisps of sleep trailing behind him. There was something comforting about being seated at his desk opening his correspondence with faint vestiges of sleepiness rising off him like the steam off his day's first mug of coffee. That mug would be brought to him by Karen if she was in yet, or made by Mr Phillips himself if she had had trouble with her journey or at home. (There is a man in her life. More than that Mr Phillips does not know, and does not want to know.) Karen often looked very slightly flushed in the mornings, something to do with make-up or getting up or, perhaps, rushed sexual activity, its memory bringing a glow to her cheeks like a remembered embarrassment. And her coffee tasted better than Mr Phillips's too, which was a mystery, since it was made to precisely the same formula (two level spoonfuls of Gold Blend, water just off the boil, dollop of skimmed milk).

By half past ten Mr Phillips would hope to have read his correspondence and dictated replies to most of it. He still has his Dictaphone – it is in his briefcase at this very moment – even though it is strictly (or even not so strictly) speaking company property. But there is something so personal about this chunky piece of metal and plastic that he had felt obliged to cling on to it and to slip it home. The Dictaphone's tiny micro-

cassette now holds replies to memos that will never be typed, signed and dispatched, letters that will never be sent, admonitions and excuses that will vanish into the electronic limbo of erased cassette tape. Mr Phillips takes the Dictaphone cassette out of his bag, holds the speaker to his ear and presses Play.

'Reply to memo from Mr Street in Administration Department,' Mr Phillips hears himself say, in the low, intimate, urgent voice he uses to his Dictaphone. 'Check to see if the early memo included a blind copy to Mr Mill and if so copy him again.'

It was Mr Mill to whom the original memo should have been sent, if he had not been so reliably inclined not to do anything about anything, ever.

'Memo begins:

'There are difficulties with the proposal to save money by switching to a cheaper brand of sticky . . . of paper with . . . er, just say Post-It notes, Karen. Full stop. To wit comma Post-It notes are patented and no cheaper brand, change that to more reasonable brand, is therefore available full stop. Apparently they were invented by an out-of-work engineer in America full stop. At the moment the budget for this item of stationery comma which costs 49p a small packet comma is fifteen thousand pounds full stop. On balance I would favour a memo from Administration informing employees of this fact comma and pointing out that free access to stationery cupboards will one day become a thing of the past if unbridled consumption of office materials cannot be checked full stop. End of memo.'

Mr Phillips stops the Dictaphone and takes it away from his ear. It would be nice to have been the man who invented Post-It notes and to feel that your wealth was accumulating minutely but perceptibly every time someone peeled a little piece of yellow paper off a block and plunked it down on somebody else's desk. Now Wilkins and Co. would never hear of his plan to save £7500, equivalent to almost a quarter of his own annual salary, by stopping people stealing so much stuff from the office for their own use.