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The Sunday Philosophy Club

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Extract

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1

Isabel Dalhousie saw the young man fall from the edge of the upper circle, from the gods. His flight was so sudden and short, and it was for less than a second that she saw him, hair tousled, upside down, his shirt and jacket up around his chest so that his midriff was exposed. And then, striking the edge of the grand circle, he disappeared headfirst towards the stalls below.

Her first thought, curiously, was of Auden's poem on the fall of Icarus. Such events, said Auden, occur against a background of people going about their ordinary business. They do not look up and see the boy falling from the sky. *I was talking to a friend*, she thought. *I was talking to a friend and the boy fell out of the sky.*

She would have remembered the evening, even if this had not happened. She had been dubious about the concert – a performance by the Reykjavik Symphony, of which she had never heard – and would not have gone

had not a spare ticket been pressed upon her by a neighbour. Did Reykjavik really have a professional symphony orchestra, she wondered, or were the players amateurs? Of course, even if they were, if they had come as far as Edinburgh to give a late spring concert, they deserved an audience; they could not be allowed to come all this way from Iceland and then perform to an empty hall. And so she had gone to the concert and had sat through a first half which comprised a romantic combination of German and Scottish: Mahler, Schubert, and Hamish McCunn.

It was a warm evening – unseasonably so for late March – and the atmosphere in the Usher Hall was close. She had come lightly dressed, as a precaution, and was glad that she had done so as the temperature in the grand circle inevitably climbed too high. During the interval she had made her way downstairs and had enjoyed the relief of the cooler air outside, eschewing the crush of the bar with its cacophony of conversation. She would find people she knew there, of course; it was impossible to go out in Edinburgh and not see anybody, but she was not in the mood for conversation that evening. When the time had come to go back in, she toyed for a few moments with the idea of missing the second half, but she always felt inhibited from any act suggesting a lack of concentration or, worse still, of seriousness. So she had returned to her seat, picked up the programme from where she had left it on the armrest next to her, and studied what lay ahead. She took a deep intake of breath. *Stockhausen!*

She had brought with her a set of opera glasses – so necessary even in the moderate heights of the grand circle. With these trained on the stage so far down below, she scrutinised each player one by one, an activity she could never resist in concerts. One did not stare at people through binoculars normally, but here in the concert hall it was permitted, and if the binoculars strayed to the audience once in a while, who was to notice? The strings were unexceptional, but one of the clarinettists, she noticed, had a remarkable face: high cheekbones, deep-set eyes, and a chin that had been cleaved, surely, by an axe. Her gaze dwelt on him, and she thought of the generations of hardy Icelanders, and Danes before them, that had laboured to bring forth this type: men and women who scratched a living from the thin soil of upland farms; fishermen who hunted cod in steel grey waters; women who struggled to keep their children alive on dried fish and oatmeal; and now, at the end of all this effort, a clarinettist.

She laid aside the opera glasses and sat back in her seat. It was a perfectly competent orchestra, and they had played the McCunn with gusto, but why did people still do Stockhausen? Perhaps it was some sort of statement of cultural sophistication. We may come from Reykjavik, and it may be a small town far from anywhere, but we can at least play Stockhausen as well as the rest of them. She closed her eyes. It was impossible music, really, and it was not something a visiting orchestra should inflict on its hosts. For a short while she considered the idea of orchestral courtesy. Certainly one should avoid giving political offence: German orchestras, of course, used to be careful about

playing Wagner abroad, at least in some countries, choosing instead German composers who were somewhat more . . . apologetic. This suited Isabel, who disliked Wagner.

The Stockhausen was the final item on the programme. When at last the conductor had retired and the clapping had died down – not as warm as it might have been, she thought; something to do with Stockhausen – she slipped out of her seat and made her way to the ladies' room. She turned on a tap and scooped water into her mouth – the Usher Hall had nothing so modern as a drinking fountain – and then splashed some on her face. She felt cooler, and now made her way out on to the landing again. It was at this point, though, that Isabel caught sight of her friend Jennifer standing at the bottom of the short flight of stairs that led into the grand circle.

She hesitated. It was still uncomfortably warm inside, but she had not seen Jennifer for over a year, and she could hardly walk past without greeting her.

Isabel made her way through the crowds.

'I'm waiting for David,' Jennifer said, gesturing towards the grand circle. 'He lost a contact lens, would you believe it, and one of the usherettes has lent him a torch to go and look for it under his seat. He lost one on the train through to Glasgow and now he's done it again.'

They chatted as the last of the crowd made its way down the stairs behind them. Jennifer, a handsome woman, in her early forties – like Isabel – was wearing a red suit on which she had pinned a large gold brooch in the shape of a fox's head. Isabel could not help but look at the fox,

which had ruby eyes, and seemed to be watching her. *Brother Fox*, she thought. *So like Brother Fox.*

After a few minutes, Jennifer looked anxiously up the stairs.

'We should go and see if he needs help,' she said irritably. 'It'll be an awful nuisance if he's lost another one.'

They took a few steps up the short set of stairs and looked down towards the place where they could make out David's back, hunched behind a seat, the light of the torch glinting between the seating. And it was at that moment, as they stood there, that the young man fell from the layer above – silently, wordlessly, arms flailing as if he were trying to fly, or fend off the ground – and disappeared from view.

For a brief moment they stared at one another in mutual disbelief. And then, from below, there came a scream, a woman's voice, high-pitched; and then a man shouted and a door slammed somewhere.

Isabel reached forward and seized Jennifer's arm. 'My God!' she said. 'My God!'

From where he had been crouching, Jennifer's husband straightened up. 'What was that?' he called to them. 'What happened?'

'Somebody fell,' said Jennifer. She pointed at the upper circle, at the point where the top layer joined the wall. 'From up there. He fell.'

They looked at one another again. Now Isabel moved forward to the edge of the circle. There was a brass rail running along the edge of the parapet, and she held on to this as she peered over.

Below her, slumped over the edge of a seat, his legs twisted over the arms of the neighbouring seats, one foot, she noticed, without a shoe, but stockinged, was the young man. She could not see his head, which was down below the level of the seat; but she saw an arm sticking up, as if reaching for something, but quite still. Beside him stood two men in evening dress, one of whom had reached forward and was touching him, while the other looked back towards the door.

'Quickly!' one of the men shouted. 'Hurry!'

A woman called out something and a third man ran up the aisle to where the young man lay. He bent down and then began to lift the young man off the seat. Now the head came into view, and lolled, as if loosened from the body. Isabel withdrew and looked at Jennifer.

'We'll have to go down there,' she said. 'We saw what happened. We had better go and tell somebody what we saw.'

Jennifer nodded. 'We didn't see much,' she said. 'It was over so quickly. Oh dear.'

Isabel saw that her friend was shaking, and she put an arm about her shoulder. 'That was ghastly!' she said. 'Such a shock.'

Jennifer closed her eyes. 'He just came down . . . so quickly. Do you think he's still alive? Did you see?'

'I'm afraid he looked rather badly hurt,' said Isabel, thinking, It's worse than that.

They went downstairs. A small crowd of people had gathered round the door into the stalls and there was a

buzz of conversation. As Isabel and Jennifer drew near, a woman turned to them and said: 'Somebody fell from the gods. He's in there.'

Isabel nodded. 'We saw it happen,' she said. 'We were up there.'

'You saw it?' said the woman. 'You actually saw it?'

'We saw him coming down,' said Jennifer. 'We were in the grand circle. He came down past us.'

'How dreadful,' said the woman. 'To see it . . .'

'Yes.'

The woman looked at Isabel with that sudden human intimacy that the witnessing of tragedy permitted.

'I don't know if we should be standing here,' Isabel muttered, half to Jennifer, half to the other woman. 'We'll just get in the way.'

The other woman drew back. 'One wants to do something,' she said lamely.

'I do hope that he's all right,' said Jennifer. 'Falling all that way. He hit the edge of the circle, you know. It might have broken the fall a bit.'

No, thought Isabel, it would have made it worse perhaps; there would be two sets of injuries, the blow from the edge of the circle and injuries on the ground. She looked behind her; there was activity at the front door and then, against the wall, the flashing blue light of the ambulance outside.

'We must let them get through,' said Jennifer, moving away from the knot of people at the door. 'The ambulance men will need to get in.'

They stood back as two men in loose green fatigues

hurried past, carrying a folded stretcher. They were not long in coming out – less than a minute, it seemed – and then they went past, the young man laid out on the stretcher, his arms folded over his chest. Isabel turned away, anxious not to intrude, but she saw his face before she averted her gaze. She saw the halo of tousled dark hair and the fine features, undamaged. To be so beautiful, she thought, and now the end. She closed her eyes. She felt raw inside, empty. This poor young man, loved by somebody somewhere, whose world would end this evening, she thought, when the cruel news was broached. All that love invested in a future that would not materialise, ended in a second, in a fall from the gods.

She turned to Jennifer. 'I'm going upstairs quickly,' she said, her voice lowered. 'Tell them that we saw it. Tell them I'll be back in a moment.'

Jennifer nodded, looking about her to see who was in charge. There was confusion now. A woman was sobbing, one of the women who must have been standing in the stalls when he came down, and she was being comforted by a tall man in an evening jacket.

Isabel detached herself and made her way to one of the staircases that led up to the gods. She felt uneasy, and glanced behind her, but there was nobody around. She climbed up the last few stairs, through one of the archways that led to the steeply racked seating. It was quiet, and the lights suspended from the ceiling above were dimmed in their ornate glass bowls. She looked down, to the edge over which the boy had fallen. They had been standing almost immediately below the point at which he had

dropped, which enabled her to calculate where he must have been standing before he slipped.

She made her way down to the parapet and edged along the front row of seats. Here was the brass rail over which he must have been leaning before, and there, down on the ground, a programme. She bent down and picked it up; its cover, she noticed, had a slight tear, but that was all. She replaced it where she had found it. Then she bent over and looked down over the edge. He must have been sitting here, at the very end of the row, where the upper circle met the wall. Had he been further in towards the middle, he would have landed in the grand circle; only at the end of the row was there a clear drop down to the stalls.

For a moment she felt a swaying vertigo, and she closed her eyes. But then she opened them again and looked down into the stalls, a good fifty feet below. Beneath her, standing near to where the young man had landed, a man in a blue windcheater looked upwards and into her eyes. They were both surprised, and Isabel leant backwards, as if warned off by his stare.

Isabel left the edge and made her way back up the aisle between the seats. She had no idea what she had expected to find – if anything – and she felt embarrassed to have been seen by that man below. What must he have thought of her? A vulgar onlooker trying to imagine what that poor boy must have seen during his last seconds on this earth, no doubt. But that was not what she had been doing; not at all.

She reached the stairs and began to walk down, holding the rail as she did so. The steps were stone, and spiral, and one might so easily slip. As he must have done, she

thought. He must have looked over, perhaps to see if he could spot somebody down below, a friend maybe, and then he had lost his footing and toppled over. It could easily happen – the parapet was low enough.

She stopped halfway down the stairs. She was alone, but she had heard something. Or had she imagined it? She strained her ears to catch a sound, but there was nothing. She took a breath. He must have been the very last person up there, all alone, when everybody else had gone and the girl at the bar on the landing was closing up. That boy had been there by himself and had looked down, and then he had fallen, silently, perhaps seeing herself and Jennifer on the way down, who would then have been his last human contact.

She reached the bottom of the stairs. The man in the blue windcheater was there, just a few yards away, and when she came out, he looked at her sternly.

Isabel walked over to him. 'I saw it happen,' she said. 'I was in the grand circle. My friend and I saw him fall.'

The man looked at her. 'We'll need to talk to you,' he said. 'We'll need to take statements.'

Isabel nodded. 'I saw so little,' she said. 'It was over so quickly.'

He frowned. 'Why were you up there just now?' he asked.

Isabel looked down at the ground. 'I wanted to see how it could have happened,' she said. 'And now I do see.'

'Oh?'

'He must have looked over,' she said. 'Then he lost his balance. I'm sure it would not be difficult.'

The man pursed his lips. ‘We’ll look into that. No need to speculate.’

It was a reproach, but not a severe one, as he saw that she was upset. For she was shaking now. He was familiar with that. Something terrible happened and people began to shake. It was the reminder that frightened them; the reminder of just how close to the edge we are in life, always, at every moment.

2

At nine o'clock the following morning Isabel's housekeeper, Grace, let herself into the house, picked up the mail from the floor in the hall, and made her way into the kitchen. Isabel had come downstairs and was sitting at the table in the kitchen, the newspaper open before her, a half-finished cup of coffee at her elbow.

Grace put the letters down on the table and took off her coat. She was a tall woman, in her very late forties, six years older than Isabel. She wore a long herringbone coat, of an old-fashioned cut, and had dark red hair which she wore in a bun at the back.

'I had to wait half an hour for a bus,' she said. 'Nothing came. Nothing.'

Isabel rose to her feet and went over to the percolator of freshly made coffee on the stove.

'This will help,' she said, pouring Grace a cup. Then, as Grace took a sip, she pointed to the newspaper on the table.

'There's a terrible thing in the *Scotsman*,' she said. 'An accident. I saw it last night at the Usher Hall. A young man fell all the way from the gods.'

Grace gasped. 'Poor soul,' she said. 'And . . .'

'He died,' said Isabel. 'They took him to the Infirmary, but he was declared dead when he arrived.'

Grace looked at her employer over her cup. 'Did he jump?' she asked.

Isabel shook her head. 'Nobody has any reason to believe that.' She stopped. She had not thought of it at all. People did not kill themselves that way; if you wanted to jump, then you went to the Forth Bridge, or the Dean Bridge if you preferred the ground to the water. The Dean Bridge: Ruthven Todd had written a poem about that, had he not, and had said that its iron spikes 'curiously repel the suicides'; curiously, because the thought of minor pain should surely mean nothing in the face of complete destruction. Ruthven Todd, she thought, all but ignored in spite of his remarkable poetry; one line of his, she had once said, was worth fifty lines of McDiarmid, with all his posturing; but nobody remembered Ruthven Todd any more.

She had seen McDiarmid once, when she was a schoolgirl, and had been walking with her father down Hanover Street, past Milne's Bar. The poet had come out of the bar in the company of a tall, distinguished-looking man, who had greeted her father. Her father had introduced her to both of them, and the tall man had shaken her hand courteously; McDiarmid had smiled, and nodded, and she had been struck by his eyes, which seemed to emit a piercing

blue light. He was wearing a kilt, and carrying a small, battered leather briefcase, which he hugged to his chest, as if using it to protect himself against the cold.

Afterwards her father had said: 'The best poet and the wordiest poet in Scotland, both together.'

'Which was which?' she had asked. They read Burns at school, and some Ramsay and Henryson, but nothing modern.

'McDiarmid, or Christopher Grieve, to give him his real name, is the wordiest. The best is the tall man, Norman MacCaig. But he'll never be fully recognised, because Scots literature these days is all about complaining and moaning and being injured in one's soul.' He had paused, and then asked: 'Do you understand what I'm talking about?'

And Isabel had said, 'No.'

Grace asked her again: 'Do you think he jumped?'

'We did not see him actually fall over the edge,' Isabel said, folding the newspaper in such a way as to reveal the crossword. 'We saw him on the way down – after he had slipped or whatever. I told the police that. They took a statement from me last night.'

'People don't slip that easily,' muttered Grace.

'Yes, they do,' said Isabel. 'They slip. All the time. I once read about somebody slipping on their honeymoon. The couple was visiting some falls in South America and the man slipped.'

Grace raised an eyebrow. 'There was a woman who fell over the crags,' she said. 'Right here in Edinburgh. She was on her honeymoon.'

'Well, there you are,' said Isabel. 'Slipped.'

'Except some thought she was pushed,' countered Grace. 'The husband had taken out an insurance policy on her life a few weeks before. He claimed the money, and the insurance company refused to pay out.'

'Well, it must happen in some cases. Some people are pushed. Others slip.' She paused, imagining the young couple in South America, with the spray from the falls shooting up and the man tumbling into the white, and the young bride running back along the path, and the emptiness. You loved another, and this made you so vulnerable; just an inch or so too close to the edge and your world could change.

Isabel picked up her coffee and began to leave the kitchen. Grace preferred to work unobserved, and she herself liked to do the crossword in the morning room, looking out onto the garden. This had been her ritual for years, from the time that she had moved back into the house until now. The crossword would start the day, and then she would glance at the news itself, trying to avoid the salacious court cases which seemed to take up more and more newspaper columns. There was such an obsession with human weakness and failing; with the tragedies of peoples' lives; with the banal affairs of actors and singers. You had to be aware of human weakness, of course, because it simply *was*, but to revel in it seemed to her to be voyeurism, or even a form of moralistic tale telling. And yet, she thought, do I not read these things myself? I do. I am just as bad as everybody else, drawn to these scandals. She smiled ruefully, noticing the heading: MINISTER'S

SHAME ROCKS PARISH. Of course she would read that, as everybody else would, although she knew that behind the story was a personal tragedy, and all the embarrassment that goes with that.

She moved a chair in the morning room so that she would be by the window. It was a clear day, and the sun was on the blossom on the apple trees which lined one edge of her walled garden. The blossom was late this year, and she wondered whether there would be apples again in the summer. Every now and then the trees became barren and produced no fruit; then, the following year, they would be laden with a proliferation of small red apples that she would pick and make into chutney and sauce according to recipes which her mother had given her.

Her mother – her *sainted American mother* – had died when Isabel was eleven, and the memories were fading. Months and years blurred into one another, and Isabel's mental picture of the face that looked down at her as she was tucked into bed at night was vague now. She could hear the voice, though, echoing somewhere in her mind; that soft southern voice that her father had said reminded him of moss on trees and characters from Tennessee Williams plays.

Seated in the morning room with a cup of coffee, her second, on the glass-topped side table, she found herself stuck over the crossword puzzle at an inexplicably early stage. One across had been a gift, almost an insult – *They have slots in the gaming industry* (3-5-7). One-armed bandits. And then, *He's a German in control* (7). Manager, of course. But after a few of this standard, she came across *Excited by*

the score? (7) and *Vulnerable we opined desultorily* (4, 4), both of which remained unsolved, and ruined the rest of the puzzle. She felt frustrated, and cross with herself. The clues would resolve themselves in due course, and come to her later in the day, but for the time being she had been defeated.

She knew, of course, what was wrong. The events of the previous night had upset her, perhaps more than she realised. She had had trouble in getting to sleep, and had awoken in the small hours of the morning, got out of bed, and gone downstairs to fetch a glass of milk. She had tried to read, but had found it difficult to concentrate, and had switched off the light and lain awake in bed, thinking about the boy and that handsome, composed face. Would she have felt differently if it had been somebody older? Would there have been the same poignancy had the lolling head been grey, the face lined with age rather than youthful?

A night of interrupted sleep, and a shock like that – it was small wonder that she could not manage these obvious clues. She tossed the newspaper down and rose to her feet. She wanted to talk to somebody, to discuss what had happened last night. There was no point in discussing it further with Grace, who would only engage in unlikely speculation and would wander off into long stories about disasters which she had heard about from friends. If urban myths had to start somewhere, Isabel thought that they might begin with Grace. She would walk to Bruntsfield, she decided, and speak to her niece, Cat. Cat owned a delicatessen on a busy corner in the popular shopping area,

and provided that there were not too many customers, she would usually take time off to drink a cup of coffee with her aunt.

Cat was sympathetic, and if Isabel ever needed to set things in perspective, her niece would be her first port of call. And it was the same for Cat. When she had difficulties with boyfriends – and such difficulties seemed to be a constant feature of her life – that was the subject of exchanges between the two of them.

'Of course, you know what I'm going to tell you,' Isabel had said to her six months before, just before the arrival of Toby.

'And you know what I'll say back to you.'

'Yes,' said Isabel. 'I suppose I do. And I know that I shouldn't say this, because we shouldn't tell others what to do. But—'

'But you think I should go back to Jamie?'

'Precisely,' said Isabel, thinking of Jamie, with that lovely grin of his and his fine tenor voice.

'Yes, Isabel, but you know, don't you? You know that I don't love him. I just don't.'

There was no answer to that, and the conversation had ended in silence.

She fetched her coat, calling out to Grace that she was going out and would not be back for lunch. She was not sure whether Grace heard – there was the whine of a vacuum cleaner from somewhere within the house – and she called out again. This time the vacuum cleaner was switched off and there was a response.

'Don't make lunch,' Isabel called. 'I'm not very hungry.'

Cat was busy when Isabel arrived at the delicatessen. There were several customers in the shop, two busying themselves with the choice of a bottle of wine, pointing at labels and discussing the merits of Brunello over Chianti, while Cat was allowing another to sample a sliver of cheese from a large block of pecorino on a marble slab. She caught Isabel's eye and smiled, mouthing a greeting. Isabel pointed to one of the tables at which Cat served her customers coffee; she would wait there until the customers had left.

There were continental newspapers and magazines neatly stacked beside the table and she picked up a two-day-old copy of *Corriere della Sera*. She read Italian, as did Cat, and skipping the pages devoted to Italian politics – which she found impenetrable – she turned to the arts pages. There was a lengthy reevaluation of Calvino and a short article on the forthcoming season at La Scala. She decided that neither interested her: she knew none of the singers referred to in the headline to the La Scala article, and Calvino, in her view, needed no reassessment. That left a piece on an Albanian filmmaker who had become established in Rome and who was attempting to make films about his native country. It turned out to be a thoughtful read: there had been no cameras in Hoxha's Albania, apparently – only those owned by the security police for the purpose of photographing suspects. It was not until he was thirty, the director revealed, that he had managed to get his hands on any photographic apparatus. *I was trembling*, he said. *I thought I might drop it.*