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The Suicide Club

Rhys Thomas

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Extract

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The vast bulk of humanity is irredeemably mediocre.
– Ronald Hayman describing Friedrich Nietzsche's beliefs

Do not go gentle into that good night . . .
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
– Dylan Thomas

1

Call me Ishmael. Apparently, you have to have a good line to start a book so I stole that one from *Moby-Dick*, which is a book about a whale that I've never read. You know when I said call me Ishmael? Well, call me Richard Joseph Henry Harper because that's my name. Yes, it's a stupid name, I know. This book is about me and my friends and it gets a bit messy later on, I have to warn you. Only in terms of raw human emotion though. But I digress. It all started with Freddy.

I remember it well, the first time that we met. Mrs Kenna was telling us about the champion British miler, Roger Bannister. Mrs Kenna was an elderly lady with whom I had a mild fascination (if that's not too oxymoronic). Her husband and son had both died of a rare brain cancer so her whole existence was coated in tragedy. And I love people with a tragedy, genuinely *love* them. There's something about those emotions at the end of the spectrum that really gets me. And this woman had them in spades, poor thing. She always spoke with eloquence, as though a blanket of words had been pulled over her grief, smoothing the bumps, ironing out all that furious emotion, and for that I admired her because I have my very own furious emotion. Boiling inside me like acid. But only sometimes. And not really.

Anyhoo, I was listening to the lesson. Apparently Roger

Bannister, who was the first man to run a mile in under four minutes – big wow – was also a brilliant doctor. I'm sorry, I didn't mean 'big wow' just then, I was just showing off. I always do that – say something that I don't mean just to show off. I know it's a bad thing though. Being the first man to do *anything* is good, but running a mile in under four minutes for the first time must have been a pretty big thing. You know, back in the fifties.

I'm going to say something a bit weird now, but don't worry because it's important that I tell you this early on. Sometimes a mental image, like a photograph, will explode in my brain and it's the most horrendous thing you can imagine. For no reason, it just shoots into my head and there it is, unblinking, deadly: c, the Worst Case Scenario ('c' stands for 'constant' by the way because a Worst Case Scenario is always constant). Let me give you an example of what I mean.

My Worst Case Scenario for Mrs Kenna is she's sitting at the side of her dead husband and son's graves and somebody comes over and rapes her, then kills her right there on her husband's tombstone. So not only does she die but the guy who kills her robs her of her dignity too. She's naked and bloody on the grave. I know it's awful, that's why it's a Worst Case Scenario. That image always came to me in history class and I hated it because it's not healthy.

It's sort of like a gift I have, imagining these sorts of things, though it is equally a curse (God, that's cheesy – in truth it's just a curse). No matter how well something is going I can always imagine something terrible out of nowhere, all black and arachnoid, first of all blurring the edges like a creeping cataract and then consuming the whole thing like carbon monoxide petrified and leaden with mass. W–C–S.

It doesn't matter if it's the first or the hundredth time you've thought about it, it never becomes more or less shocking

because it is not mutable – that's why it's a Worst Case Scenario. It's the worst possible thing that can possibly happen. I told you it was a bit weird but, as you'll see later on, it's important that you know I have these Worst Case Scenarios.

Then, all of a sudden, Craig Bartlett-Taylor started saying something from the back of the class. Lots of kids in my school have double-barrelled surnames because I go to a *very* good school.

'Miss,' is what he said.

We all turned round to look at him – he always sat at the back of every class because he was a bit of a freak. Today, Craig Bartlett-Taylor looked pale as hell. He looked like he was wearing make-up or something, but that's fine because loads of my friends wear some sort of make-up for the image, but Craig looked like he didn't know he was wearing make-up. He looked like a porcelain doll.

'I've just taken a whole bottle of pills, Miss.'

It was really weird when he said that. He said it so crisp and clear, like a snowflake. You know? Mrs Kenna was floundering, I could tell. Just more tragedy for her. Honestly, the tragedy was bursting at the seams, seeping through the pores for Mrs Kenna. She clearly didn't know what to do, even though she said, as she ran over to Craig, 'Show me the bottle.'

She looked funny running. Old people do. Their legs need WD-40.

Suddenly, Bartlett-Taylor fell off his chair on to the floor. The other kids gasped with the drama of it all. My heart was going mad. I sat up a little in my seat to see if he was frothing at the mouth – that's always a bad sign. But his mouth looked pretty dry. There didn't seem to be a pill bottle anywhere and we all said later that he must have taken the pills at the end of lunch or something.

Craig didn't even start having a fit or anything like that.

He just lay there, his eyes half open like he was just drifting off to sleep. *A sleep from which he will never awake*, a stupid Count Dracula voice said inside my head. I was worried for Craig but trying not to show it. I'd grown up with him and seeing him like that made my skin crawl a little. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what. So I just sat there like a moron.

And that was the first time I saw Freddy. Frederick Spaulding-Carter. He was out of his chair straight away and running over to Craig like the wind. His chair upped itself on to two legs and then fell to the floor in a swirl of drama.

People always say that when dramatic things happen time slows down and everything goes in slow motion. I'd never really known anything truly dramatic so I wasn't sure if it was true. But I swear to God when Freddy ran to save Craig the world didn't slow down at all. It happened at the exact same speed that I'd lived the whole of my life.

He reached Bartlett-Taylor and slipped his arm under his body, lifting him on to his side. Then he grabbed his other arm and pulled it across his chest. I can't remember it exactly but he was doing what's called the Recovery Position. You do it if someone's out cold. I don't know what it does, maybe it straightens your windpipe into your lungs so you can access air more easily. I'm not sure.

'Call an ambulance,' he said. It came out as both quiet and loud. His black hair had flopped in front of his eyes. I had never seen this boy before so why the hell was he sat at the back of my classroom?

Mrs Kenna shouted to me to go and get the headmaster and tell him what had happened. Me. Why did it have to be me? I was good in class and I did my homework most of the time so why should I miss out? By the time I finished having this thought I was halfway down the corridor because in

truth I was a little bit terrified that Craig was in real trouble. I'm not disaffected or anything like that. I'm a normal kid, and I have a good soul.

As I ran I Worst Case Scenarioed the fate of Bartlett-Taylor. It was pretty bad. At his funeral, his dad, who was about seventy because they had Craig when they were too old, was crying. It was terrible because parents who have kids who die never, ever recover. It's impossible to recover from it because it's Not Natural. We as human beings are a Natural phenomenon and when things that are Not Natural happen, like a kid dying before their parents, you can't get over it properly because it's against the normal grain of the universe, right? So anyway, his old dad was crying as he lowered his boy's coffin into the ground. It was raining and the mud at the graveside was slippery. The old man, who had a frail skeleton, couldn't keep his footing because he was just an old man, and he fell over. The coffin slumped to one side and made a horrible thud as it smacked against the walls of the grave before dropping into the pit and cracking. The coffin came to a stop and everyone knew that the boy's corpse was inside the casket, lying deathly still, nothing more than a slab of meat. Bartlett-Taylor had lost his dignity and it was all because his old man was too old and weak.

Suddenly I remembered something. A memory from when I was little. Craig and I had been playing bows and arrows. We were in the same team. It was one of those long summer days that you only really have when you're a kid. We were hiding behind this weird grass hummock in the woods. We were on our backs, our heads lying against the grass, watching the branches of the trees swaying overhead. It was so still. We had never been the greatest of friends and in truth I had teased him a little bit along with the other kids, but I had still known him since I was three and that counts for a lot. I'd forgotten all about that day in the woods, but now

there it was, in my head, making my heart beat with fear.

I smacked on the headmaster's door but he was on the phone when I burst in. He looked at me like I had just committed some terrible crime. His face was turning red and I thought that when he was through with his phone call he was actually going to murder me. He didn't like me much. I think it's because I sometimes used to get in trouble but still did well in examinations because I'm naturally intelligent. If I applied myself I reckon it's possible I could do well in life and I think, later on, I *will* apply myself and do good things for other people.

'Sir,' I shouted. Too loud.

His eyes bulged like the guy at the end of *Total Recall* when he goes out into the Martian atmosphere and the pressure basically crushes his skull.

'Sir, Mrs Kenna sent me. There's been the most terrible incident.' It was a ridiculous thing to say but sometimes I can't help saying ridiculous things to people I consider ridiculous. 'Craig Bartlett-Taylor's taken an overdose and he's collapsed off his chair.' The words spewed out fast and clear. I knew that I had to get the message out quick – the clock was ticking.

He didn't take his eyes off me as he cut his call short and dialled for an ambulance. When he was finished he asked which room Craig was in and walked out of the office. He sort of ran but he sort of walked too. Like a few steps and then a skip so that he didn't look like he was too concerned. Even though a child could be potentially dying right now.

This wasn't the first time that Craig Bartlett-Taylor had done something like this. He's got this thing in his head where he just hates everything. At least, that's the impression I get. When he's being nice, he's too nice, you know? Like it doesn't mean anything and he's just going through the motions. I think he'd had a nervous breakdown. You

never recover from one of those because it's Not Natural.

Once, when we were kids, we were making fun of him. So he said he was going to throw himself in the river and end it all. He strode off down the street and around the corner. We knew he wouldn't go through with it though. He was feeling bad because his mother had just had a stroke and one of the older kids had stolen his ice cream and thrown it at the church. We were only about ten at the time. Anyway, he came back five minutes later. We asked him why he was still alive and he said, and this is completely true, that he'd forgotten his bathers.

Then he tried to kill himself again when he was thirteen, but this attempt was more serious. He threw himself out of his bedroom window. But only broke a leg. His parents must have been cartwheeling with worry. That was around the time when I stopped making fun of him.

For some reason I started wondering if my MCR album had turned up from Play. My Chemical Romance are a band that I really like. They're punkish but they get slated and called emo a lot, though that's not really what they are. Sometimes they are a bit though. Lots of people don't get it, but that's not my fault. I love them. Play is the Internet shop where I get most of my albums. It's my parents' account but they let me use it as long as I tell them. It delivers for free and the albums are cheaper than anywhere else I can find in the *real* world. Even cheaper than Tesco, and they're pretty good. Sometimes I'll still go into HMV to get an album, but they're more expensive – I just go there because sometimes I like going into record shops because there's always a good feeling in those places. In truth I probably started thinking about the album to distract myself from Craig. I do that a lot. But now I've totally lost the thread of the story so I'd better get back to it.

We were all outside because we'd been told to wait in the

yard. The flashing blue lights of the ambulance were shining off all the walls – you can see them from around corners they are so powerful. The drama of it all made some of the girls cry and you can't blame them: death's an awful thing.

One of my best friends, a girl called Clare, who has really black hair and wears pretty cool clothes which she designs herself, was stood on her own. It was strange for her because she was one of the most popular girls in school and always surrounded by an entourage of other girls. I was with a couple of my friends, but she looked so pretty stood all on her own that I wanted to talk to her, so I went over.

'I hope he's OK,' I said, as if I was full of worry and concern. Which I was.

'What the hell was he trying to do anyway?' she said.

Clare was pretty great because if she was just hanging around the streets she'd wear jeans, studded belt and some hoody, but when she went out she'd wear skirts and look awesome. She liked the same sort of music as me but, just like me, she wasn't into it so much that she was like a goth or anything. You could say we were emo, which is short for emotional. It's sort of a term used for more sensitive kids who like music and films more than sport, I guess you could say simply, but it's a word I don't really like because I don't think you can put people into groups so easily, and I'm not really emo anyway, only a little bit, but I guess if you had to stick a label on me then it would be the closest thing. Maybe I'm a hybrid of emo and indie. Clare was more emo than me. But only just. Although extremely pretty she was one of those girls who you've known for so long you don't really think *like that* about them but sometimes you also do, you know?

'I guess it all got too much for him,' I said sarcastically, to cover up my fear.

'You really do say some weird stuff sometimes, Richie.'

'Thank you.'

'No, thank you.'

We both looked at one another and tried not to laugh. There was a small red blotch next to her nose that I guessed was the start of a spot, which was strange for Clare because her skin wasn't like that.

'He probably did it as a plea for attention.' I said 'plea for attention' because that's what morons would say.

'You shouldn't joke about it – he must be pretty fucked up to do that. He could *die*.'

When she said that, some weird distant thought climbed inside my head, which I didn't want to think about in case I started doing something stupid, like crying. I had to change the subject. It was best to think about something else entirely so I tried my best to pack the thought of Craig up into a box and lock it away.

'Are you going out tonight?' I said.

I felt bad because I was picturing her naked, even though she thought I was just her friend. That made me feel sleazy. She didn't realize that I sometimes thought of her in that way. When I spoke to her I was sometimes getting something out of it that she didn't know about, because she thought we were friends, and that's not the right thing to do.

She shrugged and looked at me with that wicked twinkle in her eye, as if she knew what I was thinking.

'Why don't you just ask me out?'

'Yeah, right.'

'I'm serious.' She took a step closer to me. We always played stupid little games like this. 'You like me, I like you. We could do stuff.'

I thought she might actually grab me and get off with me right there, but she didn't.

'You've got an overinflated sense of ego,' I quipped.

'You just don't want to admit how you feel.'

'Who the hell was that kid who put him in the Recovery Position anyway?' I asked. I wasn't changing the subject because I had just seen the same kid out of the corner of my eye and it was a natural progression for the conversation. He was dressed quite strangely because instead of wearing the school blazer he wore a sweater.

My school is a very good school. It is eclectic, which means it has a nice mix of people. Rich people. Firstly, it's a private school, so you have to pay to go here. My dad's an air traffic controller and my mother's a private doctor so we have a lot of money in my family. Both my parents inherited a lot too. It's not a fair system but it's nothing to do with me. I didn't choose to go to the school – my parents sent me.

Secondly, the school is right next to an American airbase so there are a lot of American kids who go here which means we have a fairly transatlantic vibe going on. Whatever's big in America comes to my school first.

Thirdly, because it's such a good school, lots of parents from all over Britain want to send their kids here and so it is also a boarding school, which means that some of the kids actually *live* here, which is a concept beyond my understanding.

But don't think for a second that my school is like one of those old buildings with old trees and leafy paths because it's not like that at all. You've got wholly the wrong idea if you thought that. Many of the buildings at my school were put up in the seventies and are quite hideous.

'He's a new kid,' said Clare, hooking her arm under mine and leaning her head on my shoulder. 'It's his first day. Did you see him? He was awesome.'

I had to admit that he did handle the situation well. He may well have saved the boy's life, which was quite a thing to do on one's first day at a new school.

'He's really good-looking,' she said.

Another fact that I had to corroborate. He had Chiselled Features, which I realize is cheesy, but it was true. He was one of those people whose hair always looked cool. It was quite long, nearly down to his shoulders, but he definitely wasn't a goth because it was healthy and curled intellectually away at the ends, like my little brother's. I'm not bad-looking at all but he was much better-looking than me.

'Have you met him?' I said.

She was staring at him, not even listening to me. If I'd known then what I know now about Freddy, I'd have told her to snap out of it. It was like she was in a trance. I dread to think what was going through her mind – it was probably pretty dirty. She's done some wild stuff. I always tell her that it's because she hates herself and we have a good laugh about it. We laugh at psychotherapy because we consider it to be a pseudo-science.

Anyway, all of a sudden a gurney was being rolled out of the front door, on top of which lay Craig Bartlett-Taylor. He had a drip in his arm but we could all tell that he was alive. For a second there I started feeling a little bit dizzy. All of my excuse thoughts drained away and my worry about Craig returned. I was suddenly struck with a feeling of inconsolable sadness. I started wondering how his parents would feel when they found out that their son had tried to kill himself. Again. Then I started to think that Craig Bartlett-Taylor was a selfish little shit. He always wore long sleeves, even in summer, because he used to cut himself. He wasn't trying to hide his cuts out of shame; everyone knew that long sleeves in summer was a sure sign of a self-mutilator. He *wanted* people to know because it's kind of cool to do that stuff, not that I ever would. It appeals to intelligent teenagers because we understand drama and romanticism, but have fucked-up hormones.

The paramedics hoisted him into the ambulance and I felt

Clare's head lift from my shoulder. We looked at each other and smiled a little in a rubbish attempt at reassurance that Craig would be OK. I unhooked her arm and put mine around her. She rested her head back on my shoulder and we didn't say anything as the ambulance pulled out of the yard and started up its chilling sirens.

Soon it was gone and the teachers were saying things like 'OK, everybody back inside' but Clare and I waited for a moment, staring at the autumn leaves scuttling and hopping across the dry ground. I shifted my eyes to the kid who had saved Craig. He was on his own with his hands in his pockets. Suddenly my gaze was being returned and we stared at each other from across the yard. I smiled to him and nodded my head and he smiled back. There was a brief moment between us and I found myself pulling Clare closer to me. Then Freddy went inside.