A Long Way Down

Nick Hornby

MARTIN.

Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower block. I'm not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn't inexplicable: it was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. It wasn't even very serious thought, either. I don't mean it was whimsical - I just meant that it wasn't terribly complicated, or agonised. Put it this way: say you were, I don't know, an assistant bank manager, in Guildford. And you'd been thinking of emigrating, and then you were offered the job of managing a bank in Sydney. Well, even though it's a pretty straightforward decision, you'd still have to think for a bit, wouldn't you? You'd at least have to work out whether you could bear to move, whether you could leave your friends and colleagues behind, whether you could uproot your wife and kids. You might sit down with a bit of paper and draw up a list of pros and cons. You know:

CONS - Aged parents, friends, golf club.

PROS - more money, better quality of life (house with pool, barbecue etc), sea, sunshine, no left-wing councils banning Baa-Baa Black Sheep, no EEC directives banning British sausages etc. It's no contest, is it? The golf club! Give me a break. Obviously your aged parents give you pause for thought, but that's all it is - a pause, and a brief one, too. You'd be on the phone to the travel agents within ten minutes.

Well, that was me. There simply weren't enough regrets, and lots and lots of reasons to jump. The only things in my 'cons' list were the kids, but I couldn't imagine Cindy letting me see them again anyway. I haven't got any aged parents, and I don't play golf. Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offence to the good people of Sydney intended.

MAUREEN

I told him I was going to a New Year's Eve party. I told him in October. I don't know whether people send out invitations to New Year's Eve parties in October or not. Probably not. (How would I know? I haven't been to one since 1984. June and Brian across the road had one, just before they moved. And even then I only nipped in for an hour or so, after he'd gone to sleep.) But I couldn't wait any longer. I'd been thinking about it since May or June, and I was itching to tell him. Stupid, really. He doesn't understand, I'm sure he doesn't. They tell me to keep talking to him, but you can see that nothing goes in. And what a thing to be itching about anyway! But it goes to show what I had to look forward to, doesn't it?

The moment I told him, I wanted to go straight to confession. Well, I'd lied, hadn't I? I'd lied to my own son. Oh, it was only a tiny, silly lie: I'd told him months in advance that I was going to a party, a party I'd made up. I'd made it up properly, too.

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Published by Viking / Penguin

I told him whose party it was, and why I'd been invited, and why I wanted to go, and who else would be there. (It was Bridgid's party, Bridgid from the Church. And I'd been invited because her sister was coming over from Cork, and her sister had asked after me in a couple of letters. And I wanted to go because Bridgid's sister had taken her mother-in-law to Lourdes, and I wanted to find out all about it, with a view to taking Matty one day.) But confession wasn't possible, because I knew I would have to repeat the sin, the lie, over and over as the year came to an end. Not only to Matty, but to the people at the nursing home, and....Well, there isn't anyone else, really. Maybe someone at the Church, or someone in a shop. It's almost comical, when you think about it. If you spend day and night looking after a sick child, there's very little room for sin, and I hadn't done anything worth confessing for donkey's years. And I went from that to sinning so terribly that I couldn't even talk to the priest, because I was going to go on sinning and sinning until the day I died, when I would commit the biggest sin of all. (And why is it the biggest sin of all? All your life you're told that you'll be going to this marvellous place when you pass on. And the one thing you can do to get you there a bit quicker is something that stops you getting there at all. Oh, I can see that it's a kind of queue-jumping. But if someone jumps the queue at the Post Office, people tut. Or sometimes they say, 'Excuse me, I was here first.' They don't say, 'You will be consumed by hellfire for all eternity.' That would be a bit strong.) It didn't stop me from going to the Church, or from taking Mass. But I only kept going because people would think there was something wrong if I stopped.

As we got closer and closer to the date, I kept passing on little tidbits of information that I told him I'd picked up. Every Sunday I pretended as though I'd learned something new, because Sundays were when I saw Bridgid. "Bridgid says there'll be dancing." "Bridgid's worried that not everyone likes wine and beer, so she'll be providing spirits." "Bridgid doesn't know how many people will have eaten already." If Matty had been able to understand anything, he'd have decided that this Bridgid woman was a lunatic, worrying like that about a little get-together. I blushed every time I saw her at the Church. And of course I wanted to know what she actually was doing on New Year's Eve, but I never asked. If she was planning to have a party, she might've felt that she had to invite me.

I'm ashamed, thinking back. Not about the lies - I'm used to lying now. No, I'm ashamed of how pathetic it all was. One Sunday I found myself telling Matty about where Bridgid was going to buy the ham for the sandwiches. But it was on my mind, New Year's Eve, of course it was, and it was a way of talking about it, without actually saying anything. And I suppose I came to believe in the party a little bit myself, in the way that you come to believe the story in a book. Every now and again I imagined what I'd wear, how much I'd drink, what time I'd leave. Whether I'd come home in a taxi. That sort of thing. In the end it was as if I'd actually been. Even in my imagination, though, I couldn't see myself talking to anyone at the party. I was always quite happy to leave it.

JESS

I was at a party downstairs in the squat. It was a shit party, full of all these ancient crusties sitting on the floor drinking cider and smoking huge spliffs and listening to

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weirdo space-out reggae. At midnight, one of them clapped sarcastically, and a couple of others laughed, and that was it - Happy New Year to you too. You could have turned up to that party as the happiest person in London, and you'd still have wanted up to jump off the roof by five past twelve. And I wasn't the happiest person in London anyway. Obviously.

I only went because someone at college told me Chas would be there, but he wasn't. I tried his mobile for the one zillionth time, but it wasn't on. When we first split up, he called me a stalker, but that's like an emotive word, 'stalker', isn't it? I don't think you can call it stalking when it's just phone calls and letters and emails and knocking on the door. And I only turned up at his work twice. Three times, if you count his Christmas party, which I don't, because he said he was going to take me to that anyway. Stalking is when you follow them to the shops and on holiday and all that, isn't it? Well, I never went near any shops. And anyway I didn't think it was stalking when someone owed you an explanation. Being owed an explanation is like being owed money, and not just a fiver, either. Five or six hundred quid minimum, more like. If you were owed five or six hundred quid minimum and the person who owed it to you was avoiding you, then you're bound to knock on his door late at night, when you know he's going to be in. People get serious about that sort of money. They call in debt collectors, and break people's legs, but I never went that far. I showed some restraint.

So even though I could see straight away that he wasn't at this party, I stayed for a while. Where else was I going to go? I was feeling sorry for myself. How can you be eighteen and not have anywhere to go on New Year's Eve, apart from some shit party in some shit squat where you don't know anybody? Well, I managed it. I seem to manage it every year. I make friends easily enough, but then I piss them off, I know that much, even if I'm not sure why or how. And so people and parties disappear.

I pissed Jen off, I'm sure of that. She disappeared, like everyone else.

MARTIN

I'd spent the previous couple of months looking up suicide inquests on the Internet, just out of curiosity. And nearly every single time, the coroner says the same thing: "He took his own life while the balance of his mind was disturbed." And then you read the story about the poor bastard: his wife was sleeping with his best friend, he'd lost his job, his daughter had been killed in a road accident some months before.... Hello, Mr Coroner? Anyone at home? I'm sorry, but there's no disturbed mental balance here, my friend. I'd say he got it just right. Bad thing upon bad thing upon bad thing until you can't take any more, and then it's off to the nearest multi-storey car park in the family hatchback with a length of rubber tubing. Surely that's fair enough? Surely the coroner's inquest should read, "He took his own life after sober and careful contemplation of the fucking shambles it had become"?

Not once did I read a newspaper report, which convinced me that the deceased was off the old trolley. You know: "The Manchester United forward, who was engaged to the current Miss Sweden, had recently achieved a unique Double: he is the only man

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ever to have won the FA Cup and an Oscar for Best Actor in the same year. The rights to his first novel had just been bought for an undisclosed sum by Stephen Spielberg. He was found hanging from a beam in his stables by a member of his staff." Now, I've never seen a coroner's report like that, but if there were cases in which happy, successful, talented people took their own lives, one could safely come to the conclusion that the old balance was indeed wonky. And I'm not saying that being engaged to Miss Sweden, playing for Manchester United and winning Oscars inoculates you against depression - I'm sure it doesn't. I'm just saying that these things help. Look at the statistics. You're more likely to top yourself if you've just gone through a divorce. Or if you're anorexic. Or if you're unemployed. Or if you're a prostitute. Or if you've fought in a war, or if you've been raped, or if you've lost somebody..... There are lots and lots of factors that push people over the edge; none of these factors are likely to make you feel anything but fucking miserable.

Two years ago Martin Sharp would not have found himself sitting on a tiny concrete ledge in the middle of the night, looking a hundred feet down at a concrete walkway and wondering whether he'd hear the noise that his bones made when they shattered into tiny pieces. But two years ago Martin Sharp was a different person. I still had my job. I still had a wife. I hadn't slept with a fifteen-year-old. I hadn't been to prison. I hadn't had to talk to my young daughters about a front-page tabloid newspaper article, an article headlined with the word SLEAZEBAG! and illustrated with a picture of me lying on the pavement outside a well-known London nightspot. (What would the headline have been if I had gone over? "SLEAZY DOES IT!" perhaps. Or maybe "SHARP END!") There was, it is fair to say, less reason for ledge-sitting before all that happened. So don't tell me that the balance of my mind was disturbed, because it really didn't feel that way. (What does it mean, anyway, that stuff about "the balance of the mind"? Is it strictly scientific? Does the mind really wobble up and down in the head like some sort of fish-scale, according to how loopy you are?) Wanting to kill myself was an appropriate and reasonable response to a whole series of unfortunate events that had rendered life unlivable. Oh, yes, I know the shrinks would say that they could have helped, but that's half the trouble with this bloody country, isn't it? No one's willing to face their responsibilities. It's always someone else's fault. Boo-hoo-hoo. Well, I happen to be one of those rare individuals who believe that what went on with Mummy and Daddy had nothing to do with me screwing a fifteen-year-old. I happen to believe that I would have slept with her regardless of whether I'd been breast-fed or not, and it was time to face up to what I'd done. And what I'd done is, I'd pissed my life away. Literally. Well, OK, not literally literally. I hadn't, you know, turned my life into urine and stored it in my bladder and so on and so forth. But I felt as if I'd pissed my life away in the same way that you can piss money away. I'd had a life, full of kids and wives and jobs and all the usual stuff, and I'd somehow managed to mislay it. No, you see, that's not right. I knew where my life was, just as you know where money goes when you piss it away. I hadn't mislaid it at all. I'd spent it. I'd spent my kids and my job and my wife on teenage girls and nightclubs: these things all come at a price, and I'd happily paid it, and suddenly my life wasn't there any more. What would I be leaving behind? On New Year's Eve, it felt as though I'd be saying goodbye to a dim form of consciousness and a semi-functioning digestive system - all the indications of a life, certainly, but none of the content. I didn't even feel sad, particularly. I just felt very stupid, and very angry.

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I'm not sitting here now because I suddenly saw sense. The reason I'm sitting here now is because that night turned into as much of a mess as everything else. I couldn't even jump off a fucking tower block without fucking it up.

MAUREEN

On New Year's Eve the nursing home sent their ambulance round for him. You had to pay extra for that, but I didn't mind. How could I? In the end, Matty was going to cost them a lot more than they were costing me. I was only paying for a night, and they were going to pay for the rest of his life.

I thought about hiding some of Matty's stuff, in case they thought it was odd, but no one had to know it was his. I could have had loads of kids, as far as they knew, so I left it there. They came around six, and these two young fellas wheeled him out. I couldn't cry when he went, because then the young fellas would know something was wrong; as far as they knew, I was coming to fetch him at eleven the next morning. I just kissed him on the top of his head and told him to be good at the home, and I held it all in until I'd seen them leave. Then I wept and wept, for about an hour. He'd ruined my life, but he was still my son, and I was never going to see him again, and I couldn't even say goodbye properly. I watched the television for a while, and I did have one or two glasses of sherry, because I knew it would be cold out.

I waited at the bus stop for ten minutes, but then I decided to walk. Knowing that you want to die makes you less scared. I wouldn't have dreamed of walking all that way late at night, especially when the streets are full of drunks, but what did it matter now? Although then, of course, I found myself worrying about being attacked but not murdered - left for dead without actually being dying. Because then I'd be taken to hospital, and they'd find out who I was, and they'd find out about Matty, and all those months of planning would have been a complete waste of time, and I'd come out of hospital owing the home thousands of pounds, and where was I going to find that? But no one attacked me. A couple of people wished me a Happy New Year, but that was about all. There isn't so much to be afraid of, out there. I can remember thinking it was a funny time to find that out, on the last night of my life; I'd spent the rest of it being afraid of everything.

I'd never been to Topper's House before. I'd just been past it on the bus once or twice. I didn't even know for sure that you could get onto the roof any more, but the door was open, and I just walked up the stairs until I couldn't walk any further. I don't know why it didn't occur to me that you couldn't just jump off whenever you felt like it, but the moment I saw it I realised that they wouldn't let you do that. They'd put this wire up, way up high, and there were curved railings with spikes on the top...well, that's when I began to panic. I'm not tall, and I'm not very strong, and I'm not as young as I was. I couldn't see how I was going to get over the top of it all, and it had to be that night, because of Matty being in the home and everything. And I started to go through all the other options, but none of them were any good. I didn't want to do it in my own front room, where someone I knew would find me. I wanted to be found by a stranger. And I didn't want to jump in front of a train, because I'd

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seen a programme on the television about the poor drivers and how suicides upset them. And I didn't have a car, so I couldn't drive off to a quiet spot and breathe in the exhaust fumes….

And then I saw Martin, right over the other side of the roof. I hid in the shadows and watched him. I could see he'd done things properly: he'd brought a little step-ladder, and some wire cutters, and he'd managed to climb over the top like that. And he was just sitting on the ledge, dangling his feet, looking down, taking nips out of a little hip flask, smoking, thinking, while I waited. And he smoked and he smoked and I waited and waited until in the end I couldn't wait any more. I know it was his step-ladder, but I needed it. It wasn't going to be much use to him. I never tried to push him. I'm not beefy enough to push a grown man off a ledge. And I wouldn't have tried anyway. It wouldn't have been right; it was up to him whether he jumped or not. I just went up to him and put my hand through the wire and tapped him on the shoulder. I only wanted to ask him if he was going to be long.

JESS

Before I got to the squat, I never had any intention of going onto the roof. Honestly. I'd forgotten about the whole Toppers House thing until I started speaking to this guy. I think he fancied me, which isn't really saying much, seeing as I was about the only female under thirty who could still stand up. He gave me a fag, and he told me his name was Bong, and when I asked him why he was called Bong he said it was because he always smoked his weed out of a bong. And I went, Does that mean everyone else here is called Spliff? But he was just, like, no, that bloke over there is called Mental Mike. And that one over there is called Puddle. And that one over there is Nicky Turd. And so on, until he'd been through everyone in the room he knew.

But the ten minutes I spent talking to Bong made history. Well, not history like 55BC or 1939. Not historical history, unless one of us goes on to invent a time machine or stops Britain from being invaded by Al-Qaida or something. But who knows what would have happened to us if Bong hadn't fancied me? Because before he started chatting me up I was just about to go home, and Maureen and Martin would be dead now, probably, and....well, everything would have been different.

When Bong had finished going through his list, he looked at me and he went, You're not thinking of going up on the roof, are you? And I thought, not with you, stoner-brain. And he went, because I can see the pain and desperation in your eyes. I was well pissed by that time, so looking back on it, I'm pretty sure that what he could see in my eyes were seven Bacardi Breezers and two cans of Special Brew. I just went, Oh, really? And he went, Yeah, see, I've been put on suicide watch, to look out for people who've only come here because they want to go upstairs. And I was like, What happens upstairs? And he laughed, and went, You're joking, aren't you? This is Toppers House, man. This is where people kill themselves. And I would never have thought of it if he hadn't said that. Everything suddenly made sense. Because even though I'd been about to go home, I couldn't imagine what I'd do when I got there, and I couldn't imagine waking up in the morning. I wanted Chas, and he didn't want me, and I suddenly realised that easily the best thing to do was make my life as short

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as I possibly could. I almost laughed, it was so neat: I wanted to make my life short, and I was at a party in Toppers' House, and the coincidence was too much. It was like a message from God. OK, it was disappointing that all God had to say to me was, like, Jump off a roof, but I didn't blame Him. What else was he supposed to tell me?

I could feel the weight of everything then - the weight of loneliness, of everything that had gone wrong. I felt heroic, going up those last few flights to the top of the building, dragging that weight along with me. Jumping felt like the only way to get rid of it, the only way to make it work for me instead of against me; I felt so heavy that I knew I'd hit the street in no time. I'd beat the world record for falling off a tower block.

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