Fall 2012

Man Already Falling

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He'd made fists out of his hands. He'd shoved them through the jail-like bars of the railing. He'd thought to wear gloves; the morning was unseasonably cold, after all. He'd put on a windbreaker, as if that would make more efficient his fall.

The bridge was an expansive breath over the ship canal, silvery with dew. Police had blocked off lanes of traffic on its west side, and one negotiator had been there since before first light. They had called out this policeman, who specialized in hostage negotiations, because he lived very close to the bridge, plus it was more or less his job. It was routine, really, he got these sorts of calls now and again. He turned himself out of the warmth of his bed, dressed quickly, zipped up his coat, kissed his wife good-bye. He stepped out into the dark.

It took a while to find the man, because the man was already hanging, his head nearly level with the sidewalk, and the fists, in black gloves, merged into the dark. The negotiator scanned the railing on either side, first by driving, then by walking. The cold wind blew right through him; he thought he'd arrived too late. Finally he saw a skip in the railing, two skips, bites out of the steel. The negotiator stopped, walked backwards several paces so as to be out of hearing range. He called for back-up, called for an ambulance and heavy rescue, then closed his phone with a snap and walked to where the man was hanging.

He looked over the railing, saw the man's head, his dark hair haloed with streetlight. Saw his outstretched arms, the pale skin of his wrists in the gaps between sleeve and glove. The negotiator lay himself down on the sidewalk and entered into negotiations with the man, face to face. He was asking the man to give up his hostage, to set him free, to give him another chance. What he said exactly was not reported, but it was something to this effect, and in any case there was no negotiating to be had. The man twisted his fists in the bars, but otherwise did not respond.

Meanwhile, light had broken clear from the mountains,
revealing an eggshell sky. Not a single cloud, not a drop of rain. Everything was made visible for miles, every peak of the Cascades, each ripple in the water, all the red and yellow leaves clinging to their branches. The skyscrapers of the city shone.

Meanwhile, traffic snagged and knotted. People cursed this Monday morning over any other. The bridge rumbled with the morning commute, and the man twisted his fists, and the negotiator negotiated in all the ways he knew, while scrapping together another plan that involved seizing, securing and clamping the man to the bridge.

The man was not interested in negotiating. And before he could be seized, secured or clamped, he was already falling, one glove caught in the jail-like bars of the railing.

But before he fell, he was here, his hand in the glove. He'd made his hands into fists, and the fists were stuck in the ribs of the railing, disappearing the steel. It were those two small black cuts that tipped off the negotiator, who had then lain his body across the sidewalk to be at the same level, more or less—in any case, not talking down. But the man wouldn’t talk in any direction, wouldn’t even look at him, always looking at something through and beyond.

This wasn’t the best scenario. Most people responded, and often they said terrible things, but the negotiator never took it personally. It was part of the job. Now, the talking was not working, so he inwardly planned to seize the man, and while he went over the plan, he allowed another part of his brain to attempt communication—a sort of telepathy. He bore through with his eyes, putting his own thoughts into the hanging man’s head, though not the thoughts that included the plans to seize him.

The man’s name was unknown but he looked to be in his mid- to late thirties, that’s what reporters reported. He was Caucasian, dark-haired and not shabby, what with the leather gloves and brand-name windbreaker, which reporters were not allowed to name, lest the jacket get a bad rap or inspire others to jump off bridges. In fact, they were not really supposed to report on bridge
jumps at all, and so they were kept behind yellow police tape, not allowed to interview the man or the negotiator, who were both busy anyhow.

More people than not were late that day. Busses were radioed to tread lightly on the bridge, to tip-toe across. Some of the traffic and lateness had to do with the hanging man, some of it didn't, but most of it was blamed on him anyway. People thought out loud that whoever was jumping should jump already, so that lanes could be reopened and everyone could get on with the banalities of the day.

At that moment he was still attached to the bridge, and it wasn't so much about jumping as it was about falling. Light from the east held up the sky, rounded it out. The bridge held up the man. Talks went on, the negotiator negotiating with himself more than with the hanging man, since the hanging man did not respond, meanwhile orchestrating a plan to seize him, something he didn't tell anyone yet, not even heavy rescue, mostly because he was busy inserting thoughts into a certain brain by telepathy—and because there was no time. The man's hands wanted out of the gloves. The negotiator reached for his handcuffs so slowly the man would not notice, if indeed he noticed things. His hand closed on the cold curve of metal but the man was already falling, one empty glove stuck in the jail-like bars of the railing.

When the man's hands were still inside the gloves and wedged into the railing, light broke over the mountains, and if the negotiator believed in signs, which he didn't, he would take this as a good sign. Light breaking over anything is always hopeful, and if the hanging man did not see or hear the negotiator, maybe the light overhead would find him in a way that no one and nothing else could.

He had been hanging for about an hour at that point. His feet had found stability, sort of, on the tiny bit of pipe no more than a few inches wide; in any case, something that is better than nothing in a situation such as this.

The negotiator had lain down on the sidewalk. He felt the cement cold and rough through his layers, through the coat to the

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shirt to the skin, down through the ribcage to his heart. He felt the small trembling movements of the bridge. Did the hanging man feel them, too? It didn't seem that the man felt anything, or heard or saw—his eyes were blank as a saint's, always looking through and beyond.

The negotiator tried to put himself in that vacuum where the man existed, which was like nonexistence, tried to edge into that place. He imagined himself hanging from the bridge beside the man, on the other side of the bars. He didn't like it there, not one bit, but he put himself there in his mind so that maybe the man would see him and listen to him, and decide that maybe his bed with or without wife was warm enough. He would see the light breaking overhead and it would mean something, more than the absence of rain, a sign if one believed in signs. Then the hanging man would unscrew his fist and take the offered hand, allow himself to be pulled up—then he would not have slipped out of the glove the way he eventually did; his hands relaxed out of fists, and first one hand slipped and then the other.

It was still dark out. The man had both hands in his gloves. In fact, he was not yet hanging but had put one leg over the railing of the bridge. One leg, and a passing car was able to tell that this was not just another early riser out for exercise, but a man out for death, and so placed the 911 call and drove on.

The call went from operator to dispatcher to police station to the negotiator, who lived close to the bridge and who left his warm bed and warm wife, put on his black coat and zipped it all the way up.

By that time, the man had both legs on the side of nonexistence, then turned his whole body against that darkness, still facing the road, looking out east. If he were looking at all, he would see the lights of the city spread out before him, pulsing toward an abyss that meant water. He tried to grip the top bar of the railing, but it was much too fat for his hands. Instead he gripped the vertical steel ribs that held up the top bar and lowered himself, kicking his feet as though testing the depth, as though he were swimming in a
lake, and he were a child, trying to see if the water was too deep for him. If his toes could touch the sandy floor, he knew he was safe. But he was not in a lake, he was hanging from a bridge, though his foot did graze something solid. He reached toward it again, the tiniest ledge just under the bridge, so his body was slightly angled inward to fully rest one foot upon it.

He wore a windbreaker and gloves because it was cold, and steel was colder on an unseasonably cold morning. Had he not worn gloves, his hands would've stiffened, been unable to grip for long and his task would have been accomplished sooner—if he thought it was such a thing, a task on his weekly to-do list, a nagging item which can never be checked off if accomplished.

In the dark of that Monday morning, the negotiator got the call. He did not want to exchange his warm bed for the cold air of the bridge, but this was his job, and so. He pulled on his clothes, kissed his wife, drove through and over the city lights. He could not find the man at first, feared he'd arrived too late, thinking that if he hadn't kissed his wife or zipped up his coat he could have got there in time; it's often the fractions of seconds that make all the difference. He felt something like relief when he saw the man hanging on the other side of the bridge, his head sidewalk-level, his gloved hands like black knots.

When back-up and heavy rescue and paramedics and the fire department and policeman after policeman arrived and blocked off lanes of traffic and barred reporters, they assessed where the man would fall if he fell so that they could clear an area, seal it off. If the man thought he was aimed at the water, he was wrong. He was not yet at the apex of the bridge, which would have guaranteed water, though it could've also guaranteed houseboat or tugboat or barge. What falling people often do not know is that the effect is about the same; water is hardly more forgiving. Water is like concrete and concrete is like water. The hanging man, if he fell, would hit a parking lot by the ship canal—which he did hit, because he did fall, after nearly four hours of not falling; his hand left one glove and took with him the other glove, and for 2.5 seconds he was in over his head, not touching anything.

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Two point five seconds is only an estimate. In any case, less than three. These things are known, quantifiable—these are easily accessible facts. Also a fact: a man weighing 160 pounds who falls 150 feet will reach ground at a rate of 55 miles per hour.

Take a story problem out of a child’s arithmetic book: If a man weighs one hundred sixty pounds and falls one hundred fifty feet, how long will it take him to reach the ground? Time equals distance divided by rate. \( t = \frac{150}{55} \), thus: \( t = 2.7272727272727272727272 \).

You can take the .72 to infinity. It can go on like that forever, skipping over itself, never reaching 2.8 seconds, and certainly never three; the man falling can skip through the air like that, sustaining 2.72, holding, holding, keeping the .72 close to him, the .72 will hold him up, will keep him suspended in the air so that he won’t hit ground or water or houseboat or car or unfortunate pedestrian, the .72 will keep him infinite, alive. But nobody knew how much the man weighed, and whatever it was, it was not 160 pounds, but something slightly more or less, because he cut through the air with a windbreakered body, did not catch on numbers or infinities, and hit the edge of the parking lot at approximately 9:34 am.

He zipped the jacket up to his chin, pulled on black leather gloves like a criminal. He closed the door on his sleeping wife and sleeping child, sneaked out into the night, though it was technically morning. He put one foot before the other, and soon he was walking the bridge. Against the dark sky it nearly floated, the bridge suspending in the air—though somewhere he must’ve known it was solid steel, supported by concrete and grounded by mounds of earth on either side.

One foot and then the other. One foot. One leg and then the other. One gloved hand and then the other gloved hand. Streetlamps bruising light onto the pavement. One outstretched toe, then the others, one arm downward, then the other, hands through the bars, easier than holding on. This might be like prison, cold steel bars and a gash of darkness at your back, looking out to the world, even if the world is only a potholed road spattered with light, but nevertheless always behind bars and always looking out.
And everyone always looking in. Case in point: A man on his belly on the sidewalk, looking in, chewing up words, spitting them out. The hanging man twists his fists in the bars. Kicks a foot which slips from the little ledge, puts the foot back on the ledge. Why the ledge? Lets it slip off again. To hang or not to hang? Not really hanging, not holding on, hands won't stop making fists and fists don't slip through the bars. Stuck there, then. How to make the hands stop making fists? Body will not obey brain. Stop making fists, yet the body still makes fists. Why fists?

And so on. Stuck in the jail-like bars of the railing, fists turn into hands, and hands slip through the bars, and body slips through the air, and man falls through life.

But he was already falling before he fell. He was falling before he put on his windbreaker and sealed his hands in leather gloves, before he looked at his to-do list, before he left his house, before he put one foot on the sidewalk and then the other, before he walked through his slumbering neighborhood, he was already falling. He was falling when he found himself below the bridge, which looked like a cathedral with the windows blown out. He was falling when he heard a car clunk overhead, when he looked out to the dark abyss that was water, when he climbed up the stairs to the bridge, when he put one foot forward and then the other, when one leg was already over, when the car passed and placed the 911 call, when he found the ledge and rejected the ledge, when the hostage negotiator got the call that took him from his warm bed and wife, when he held on and then did not hold on, when fists made hostages of his hands, when the negotiator was on his belly trying telepathy, when the negotiator was reaching for handcuffs, the man was already falling.

The negotiator saw him fall. It took no time at all; the man was there and then the man was not there. The negotiator's stomach dropped out of him and through the sidewalk, bridge and down.

Cameras clicked and journalists scribbled and someone
cried out. The negotiator felt his own gravity, flattened to the ground, as though the pressure created by the man falling through the air built up inside him, too. He wondered if other people felt it. He wondered if one single falling man could change the pressure in the air throughout the whole city.

He hadn't any time to grab one fist, to grab it with all his strength, handcuff it to the bridge, as though the man and bridge were both guilty. Then to hoist him up and over to this side of the railing, holding the entire man hostage. The negotiator, not negotiating at all, would push the man to the cement. He would hold him there with all his weight and cuff the man to himself.

But time passes so quickly one cannot see it, and before the negotiator knew he was falling, the man was falling, and before he could get that inside his head as a fact and not an unknown, the man was no longer falling, but fallen, because 2.5 or 2.6 or 2.9 seconds had long passed, and everything had already happened.

The negotiator laid his cheek against the cement, rounded out the seconds. He closed his eyes. The noise closed in around him. Reporters yelled questions: What happened? Why did you let him fall? Sir? Why didn't you do something? Sir?

In his mind he was bringing the man back up through the air, piecing him back together, lodging him once again in the railing. He could begin again, there would be another chance. But it was the end, not the beginning, and in the end there was only one black glove caught in the jail-like bars of the railing.