

One Small Step

I'm ready, Greg.

The sweat runs down my back. Is the cord tight enough? I hope it is. My throat's dry, I should have had a drink, but soon it won't matter. One way or another. In the cosmic scale of things it's just one small step for a man. But it's the drop that matters. I hope the cord's tight enough, I hope the knots are in the right places. The tension has to be just right, they say: too tight, and it could all be over too soon; too loose, and things could get messy. Like things did with you. I blink back the tears, it's too late now.

Shall I step, though, Greg, or shall I jump? I can't decide. Must keep my courage up. But it's a big thing this, a giant leap. Isn't it? What happens afterwards, I wonder? Oblivion? You could tell me, I know.

I can hear you trying to reason with me, saying don't do this. But what happened to you, that was my fault, you see. And now I have to atone. They all tried to tell me there was nothing I could've done, that it was your decision, it was your life. But I know the truth. I've had to live with it. And now I'm back, in the very place where you once stood, poised.

They ask me did I love you, Greg? Yes, I did. You know that, no question. I was with you all the time, wasn't I? We liked the same places, we read the same books, played with the same gadgets. We listened to music too, you and I. Rock concerts and jazz festivals; operas and orchestras. Do you remember the last concert, that early summer Prom before we came here? Richard Strauss, *Death and Transfiguration*. I wish I'd listened.

Oh, and the things we did! The mud-steaming rugby in the winter mist, the breathless rush surfing at Broadbeach, the adrenalin-white-water on the Zambezi. The night we got high and lay on the veldt, counting the stars and giving names to every one: Haka; Rhusgel; Altar; Mildred (that one was yours). Always your physical presence was there, like a river boulder, a temple-stone, a moon of Jupiter. But did my love, our love, go deeper than that? No; I don't think so. I wanted to be your follower, to bathe in your light, to share in your daring. But that was all. I wanted so much to be like you – to inspire with my recklessness, to show the world I wasn't afraid. And that was why I encouraged you. Go on Greg, you can do it, you can fly. Maybe it was because I didn't love you enough; or maybe you loved me too much. But you took your turn, and checked the tightness of the cord, and in your own time you took the step. *This* step, the one before me now.

And you were gone.

At first I was strong. You know how I went to the funeral, consoled your parents, stood up and read the lost useless words, an empty Auden. I went on with my life, tried to make the best of it. But the worm of your loss slowly chewed my insides to pulp. First the job went, then the flat. I asked the pale ghostly dust and I asked the burning amber phantom, and they took me down. I fell far and

long, but strong hands dragged me back up again and I knew I must be strong, strong like you Greg. I would have to turn my face outwards. But have I succeeded?

I think of all this, but still I haven't moved. I need to do it, do this penance that completes the pilgrimage. Here I stand, after all these miles, under an African sun that shrivels my scalp. My shirt sticks to my spine and shoulder-blades. My heart pounds like a runner's. And the cord is tight, but is it right? Shall I jump or shall I step? To step is confident, to jump, despairing. Soon I'll know what lies beyond: oblivion, or life renewed; darkness, or resurrection. And I turn and see, watching, the grey-eyed girl whose name I don't know.

And I spread my arms like a hanging Jesus, atoning, and I step confident. The air rushes past me, tugging my cheeks and hair and I'm flying and you, Greg – you're flying with me. There's a roaring and a rushing, then I feel the cord taking the strain and I think, this is it. Now is the time, soon I'll see. And the harness straps tug at my shoulders and thighs, and I'm slowing like your strong arms have grabbed me. Greg won't let me fall, I think, not this time, he's holding me. The gushing, churning river is thirty feet below as the rebound kicks in and I bounce, then the rope starts to haul me back, upwards, so far above. The people are whooping and clapping, up there on the bridge. They're clapping for you, Greg. You've rescued me. Shall we say farewell now? Can we bear it?

I close my eyes as they haul me out of the gorge, and I rise again. Then I'm back, reborn, transfigured, and I crouch by the parapet of sun-blistered iron. I'm sobbing and shaking because it's over. And the grey-eyed girl is crouching over me, saying something. Were you frightened, she says, hey are you okay?

It was glorious, I say, wiping my tears. Now her turn is called, and I grab her wrist tight and say, make sure you come back, all right? Make sure you come back safe. I've a story to tell you.