

*Bacon roll, extra sauce*

*By Andy Darley*

“Come on girl, it's easy! Live a bit!”

The young builder – I still don't know his name – dances a couple of steps further out onto the beam and beckons towards me. I watch him, feeling the bare concrete of the roof through the shredded feet of my tights, shoes who-knows-where at street level.

Down there it's a horrible, still, sun-baked London rush hour but up here the wind is cool and fresh. It moulds my business skirt and blouse to my body, teases his sun-bleached hair and sends his open fluorescent vest whipping out from his shirtless torso.

Very nice. I'll have some of that with chips, please. Extra sauce.

I could, you know. If we did it, here, under the open sky with the clamour of the City streets rising as a dim murmur from below, there's no-one out there to judge or condemn me any more.

And if I went over there and gave him one little tiny nudge, just enough to send him plunging off his beam and down seven storeys, there'd be nobody to know I was here, or miss me when I fled.

I wonder what I should do. I wonder how I got here from where I was an hour ago. And I wonder where I'm going next.

“Come on!” he calls again, holding his hands out to me.

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I'd held it together longer than I thought I would – all the way out of the office and downstairs to reception, all through the smiley farewell to Morag on the security desk as I surrendered my pass to her, a year to the day after she'd first filled in all my details with her unreadable handwriting and spun it across the desk to me. Out onto Moorgate, where the sticky summer heat rushed in on me and stole my breath and forced me to gasp like a landed fish as the beads of sweat sprung up out of nowhere and the traffic inched towards the lights, belching fumes.

The rush hour bedlam was brewing up nicely. Not at its peak yet, they'd let me out early because, really, what was the point in my staying to the week's bitter end, but the usual broadside of white vans and black cabs, motorcycle couriers and London buses were already being added to by volleys of POETS day traffic. Push Off Early, Tomorrow's Saturday, and the roads and pavements were already clogging with lobster-faced commuters doing just that.

Piss off, Ellie, total sadcase.

No, that wasn't fair. I had friends there.

I think.

There's a patch of grass on the junction at London Wall, opposite the mobile phone shop and the pub, and I made it that far before the tears came and the great gulping sobs ripped out of me, making the Japanese tourists gape and the flashy young bankers nudge each other and grin at the

mad girl producing a noise like a seal being clubbed.

It's stupid – so unbelievably, embarrassingly, toe-curlingly, humiliatingly stupid – but right then the most important thing in the world to me was that I spent twelve whole months of my life working with these people, a year during which my world ended twice over and I clung to them like a lifebelt, a year of going to the pub with them and contributing to whip-rounds and sharing jokes and sending them hugs on Facebook, and once it was over they didn't even get me a bloody leaving card.

I mean, I didn't expect a present – I'm a temp, after all, or at least I was. Temps don't get presents, leaving is what we do. But a card's a different thing. You don't dip into your purse for a two pound coin, you dip into your soul and fish out a little pearl of what you truly feel. And then, because that's not the sort of thing you show to other people, you express your sentiments by carefully inscribing their card with the same hackneyed and well-worn phrase you always use. But the point is, for a moment you think about the person and what they mean to you – you really think about them.

No card for Ellie.

It's not as if I didn't sign cards for them – my first was a week after I started, a good luck card for a Mum-to-be called Cait who I'd chatted with at the vending machine, whose departure with a month to go was the occasion of a jolly, laughter-filled half hour and some ridiculously delicious home-concocted lemonade. I signed my second a fortnight later, to the same woman, finding a blank corner to add my condolences at her loss. And when I suddenly lost Dad – that loud, smiling, boisterous figure who'd been both parents to me all my life but whose heart proved not as stout as we'd always believed – it was Cait who'd found a quiet corner to hold me and tell me she understood the emptiness, even though I thought to myself how could it possibly have compared to hers?

And that day I returned home early with a killer migraine and found Mark in the kitchen bent over Helene Botley, who he'd sworn was just the cricket club scorer, and she was wearing my second-best business suit with the skirt rucked up around her waist and my knickers – my own effing La Senza knickers – around her ankles, and he was calling her by my name and doing something to her from behind that I had absolutely, totally and unequivocally told him he was never, ever going to be allowed to do to me – well, when that happened it was the four girls from customer relations, Pru, Lou, Sue and Big Rebecca, who took me off on a bender so spectacular that to this day none of us can remember how we came to find ourselves waking up the next morning in an abandoned Mitsubishi Evo parked up in the shadow of the Emirates Stadium wearing feather boas, Mexican hats and false moustaches.

I was looking forward to seeing what the girls wrote in my card – would it be funny, or sentimental, or just plain obscene? And what would my colleagues in admin, Faheema and Derek, put? How would Morag want me to remember her, and Eamonn, and Queer Nazir, and that funny bloke Allan in IT, who used to bring in home-made cake every Friday and then suddenly stopped without ever saying why?

So, as the day went on, I kept expecting to be sprung from my finishing-off of projects and tidying up of loose ends by that sudden not-really-spontaneous cluster of bodies that gathers round a desk when it's presentation time, its members grinning the knowing grin that comes from a collective anticipation of the moment when the recipient will suddenly notice they're surrounded and look up with an expression of shock that melts into embarrassed pleasure.

But the moment never came.

People said their goodbyes individually, gave me enough best wishes to open a shop with, and then returned to what they'd been doing before. And I slunk out of the door at four, my carefully planned spontaneous words of thanks unspoken and a great big empty howling hole of hurt opening up inside me because where was I going next and who was I going there with?

I'm 24 years old, not in debt any more but certainly no lady of leisure, I've got no work and none on the horizon, and I live in a rented flat in Stratford, above a foul old fishing bait shop with no space to unpack all my stuff from the break-up. I can't even call anyone up to go out on the lash with, do some serious sorrow-drowning and put it all off for a night, as I left my mates back home when I'd followed Mark to London and all our new friends were his friends really.

So there I was, sitting slumped on the sun-scorched oval of grass, buffeted from all sides by the noises and colours and stench of a city on the move, and sobbing like it was Dad's funeral or the day I took a meat tenderiser to Mark's ring all over again.

All the good stuff seemed behind me. The present stretched only about as far as the blurry kneecaps and wheel hubs I could just about make out when I fisted the tears away from my eyes, and in front of me there was nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.

Except a hand holding out a cardboard coffee cup, stretching it out almost under my nose so that I could smell the cinnamon in it, wafting it gently so that I couldn't miss the aroma. My favourite. I looked up, to see the worried face of a man in his mid-50s, flushed red in the heat. Thinning sandy hair. Tie pulled a bit wonky. Suit not as well-looked after as it ought to be. Man not as well looked-after, come to that.

Allan. From IT. Cake man. I was reflected in his glasses. What the?

“You hate blueberry muffins, don't you? I remember you saying. But it was all they had so I got it for you anyway. You can put it in the bin if you like.”

He offered me the muffin with one hand and the coffee with the other, arms stretched out awkwardly in front of him as he crouched down looking anxiously at me. I was sure he was going to topple forward any second, so I reached out for the muffin and found my fist full of balled-up, shredded tissue that fell in clumps like the debris from a wash where the pockets weren't checked properly.

“There aren't any bins,” I said. “Because of the bombs.”

“No, yes, absolutely, good point, you'd better let me eat it then. But the coffee – you like it with cinnamon, I'm sure you do. Or was it vanilla? Look, do you mind if I sit down too? This is murder on my knees.”

I managed a washed-up half smile and took the coffee and the muffin while he sprawled over onto his backside and then collected himself, pulling wayward limbs back into control and tucking his feet under him. He looked out of place sat on the grass, self conscious and overdressed, like a visiting politician reading a story to a primary class who've been taken out on the field because it's too hot for the indoors. A primary class of one, with red eyes and streaky make-up, who didn't want to be there but couldn't think of anywhere else to be either.

I didn't understand why he was sitting in front of me with coffee and not up the road with the rest of them enduring the Friday close of play wrap-up meeting, the weekly boast-fest and bore-draw

where everyone shared their achievements for the week and invented some if they didn't have any. I never liked them much, although I always thought students of human nature would find them fascinating, how some people shrank to the back and mumbled while others treated it like a chance to show off in front of Simon Cowell, and it didn't much make a difference who'd done something worth talking about and who hadn't because the same people always reacted the same way, whatever the week had brought them.

Allan, I think, always treated them as a necessary evil. His little domain was the IT systems and – apart from the cake, now all-but forgotten – frankly no-one noticed him at all except when something went wrong. His measurements of success were server uptime (usually high), the number of false positives in the spam traps (always low) and how many licences he could screw the funds for from management, so that we can all have legal software (middling, generally). He was listened to with impatience and forgotten about immediately. We used to chat occasionally, but I didn't particularly think I'd made an impression on him.

“I fart, you see. It's a talent - it comes in very useful sometimes.”

He looked at me earnestly and I had no idea why. What on Earth was I supposed to make of that? It wasn't something I particularly remembered him doing, but he obviously thought it was important. I tried to find an answer but there was really nothing I could think of to say, so there was a silence during which I waved the muffin in vague conversational circles and his eyes followed it hungrily before switching back to my face.

“This is – you – I'm sorry, what?” was the best I could manage.

“I suppose it's a bit like what a skunk does. Except I don't drive people away, not that, I get out of going to things that I'd prefer not to do. Some carefully-positioned farting, a bit of groaning and stomach-clenching, and soon people are asking if I need to go home.” He took off his glasses and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Usually they're standing on the other side of the room when they ask that, of course.”

“And then what – oh, wait!” Despite myself, I was fascinated. I did actually remember him being taken ill like that once. He'd adamantly refused to go home and insisted he had to attend the meeting that was about to start. Faced with the prospect of his flatulent arse in a small room with no ventilation and 12 other people, it was swiftly and unanimously decided there was no need for IT input after all. I'd caught a glimpse of him an hour later when I popped out for the loo myself, sat at his desk in splendid isolation, getting on with his work unmolested and looking deeply contented.

“You cunning bastard,” I said, thoroughly impressed, and took a deep drink of coffee. It was perfect – cooled just enough to be drinkable and flavoured exactly as I like it. “But why now?”

“Oh, well, it was you. Hanging on by the skin of your teeth as you left. I don't really pretend to know what's going on in there – ” he pointed straight at my forehead “ – but something obviously is. I said to myself, 'Allan, that girl will be in tears before she's 10 paces down the road', and so you were.”

“And you followed me? With a muffin?”

He nodded, and then corrected himself: “Well, I didn't have the muffin with me when I left, I had to buy that. The coffee too. But you probably guessed that.”

I nodded gravely, and remember past times when the cake he offered around had been fresh and

hand-made, and not plastic-wrapped.

“Allan, can I ask – why did you stop bringing cakes in? You used to bring them in every week and then you didn't any more and nobody knew why.”

“Nobody asked why,” he said simply. And then: “Eleanor used to bake them.”

He looked uncomfortable and shifted his weight. The sun was still beating down with late afternoon fierceness and he peered longingly at the shade from the sole tree, which I'd somehow managed to completely avoid. I had obviously accidentally pressed a button I should have left alone, but how was I to know? And anyway, he had wanted to distract me from my misery, hadn't he?

“Eleanor? That's my full name.”

“I know. It's my wife's, too. Ex-wife's.”

“Oh. And she - ?”

“Yes. She did. I thought we'd found a sort of a level place when the kids got older and left home – heaven knows we fought enough when they were younger, even talked about ending it, the marriage I mean, but we got past that.”

He searched my face for understanding, and I nodded reassuringly at him over the coffee cup, still clutching the damn muffin. “So what happened?” I asked.

“Oh, it was all very civilised. Unexpected, but civilised. She just told me one day that she was damned if she'd grow old washing my underpants and going on holiday to Devon, and by the way did I know she hated baking?”

I tried to stifle a smile but it wouldn't be stopped, breaking out at one end of my mouth the moment I squelched it from the other. Allan saw it, but didn't seem offended – in fact, he gave a rueful grin back.

“I had a go at the cakes myself, but the result was chemically very similar to the rendering on our porch so I didn't bring any into work. That first Friday I got a lot of puzzled looks from people stopping by for the usual, but no-one said anything. And the next week they didn't stop by.” He shrugged. “Meanwhile Eleanor had gone travelling – she said she wanted to see Egypt and Vietnam and Peru while she was still young enough to enjoy them.”

I thought about when Mark left – or, to be more accurate, when Mark made it plain that the mortgage was in his name so if I really couldn't discuss things like an adult and accept that I was over-reacting I should start looking for a place to live.

It had been so completely sudden, such a total hosepipe of cold water to the face, that I'd stood staring silently at him in disbelief. I'd gone to work thinking we were sailing happily along an admittedly slightly choppy, but still definitely petal-strewn, course to an Indian Ocean honeymoon, two-point-four pink-faced (and perfectly behaved, and intelligent, and talented) offspring, and a lifetime of arguing good-naturedly over the TV remote. And then out of nowhere our ship had foundered on a dozy bint from Surbiton who liked a bit of dressing up and didn't mind taking it up the bum now and then.

And to think – somewhere in all that he'd managed to leave me half convinced that it was my fault,

the snivelling shit.

The sudden blast of a horn from a car at the junction, and a burst of indignant swearing from a bicycle courier cutting across against the lights, brought me back to the moment with a guilty start as I realised that Allan had stopped talking some time before. He was looking at me intently – even more so than when he'd first arrived – searching for something in my face.

“Ellie, what I learned – sometimes, it's actually better to just get it over with.”

I coloured. My humiliation had become pretty widely known in the office, though no-one had been anything but sympathetic and angry on my behalf, and obviously he'd heard too. I stared back him defiantly over the coffee cup.

Allan assessed the stare as if it was a suspect server log and gave a sharp nod of satisfaction – whatever he'd been looking for in me, he'd found.

“You'll be fine,” he said gruffly, as if he was embarrassed to have unburdened himself so freely, and gripped me briefly by the shoulder before struggling to his feet. I made to get up too, but he waved me down again and backed away, shooting one last glance at the muffin.

I watched him pick his way through pedestrians to the Tube station, clumsy and a bit comical. He's a good sort, I told myself. Weird, but a good sort for all that. I just wished he hadn't reminded me so much of Dad when he touched me.

But I suppose that makes sense too, in a way, because Dad would have said something at the time to make it all fit together. I can almost hear his voice, rising with incredulity: “A cricket scorer? In the kitchen?” And then there would have been a barrage of dreadful puns, probably based around dot balls and leg breaks, and Mark might well have received a little visit. Nothing threatening, I'm sure, just bum-clenchingly uncomfortable for him, a little man-to-man chat that I'd never know the contents of but would feel the effect of in Mark's behaviour. Dad never liked him, though he did his best to hide it on my account, except that very merry New Year's Eve a while back where he called him a copper-plated knob and I spat my drink most of the way up the wall laughing.

Dad also used to say that if you sit still long enough the ants will always find you, and he was right about that too – there was one searching its way up the side of the empty coffee cup already. I brushed it off, hauled myself upright and fished a napkin out of my bag to put in the cup and soak the dregs up. Then I dropped it and crushed it underfoot, flattening it so I could slot it into my bag until I found a bin. The muffin went in, too, and I was ready to head off down down the road to catch the Tube at Bank.

Well, not quite. As I crossed the road I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the building society window. If I went on the Underground looking this, with panda eyes from smeary make-up and hair all over the place, they'd be looking to see if I had a hat so they could put coins in it. Emergency action obviously needed.

A dark, shadowy doorway to a closed-up shop gave me a space to work on repairs, and I looked critically at the face that peered back at me as I went to work with tissues and a hairbrush. As I moved, the angles in the reflection changed, colours stripped away into a flat rich sepia by the backless gloom behind the shop window. For a moment I saw the traces of the teenage me, wide-set eyes still optimistic, and then the light caught me differently and I saw myself in 20 years' time, tight-lipped and eroded. This was no good at all. I finished up quickly, snapped my bag shut, and plunged back out into the sun, hoping that no-one had been watching, wondering what they would

be thinking if they had.

For a while I marched briskly along, shooting the gaps between less speedy pedestrians like a seasoned London pavement-hopper, but then I felt my feet starting to drag and increasingly I was dawdling, being carried along by the tide instead of surfing it. I became a slow-moving obstacle, buffeted by briefcases and shoulder bags, muttered at darkly by commuters hurrying to their trains and by shopgirls with hot dates to get ready for. I found I didn't care – it was my last time walking down here at this time of day and they were just going to have to lump it. I was in no sort of hurry to get back to my flat and the silence that would greet me there, so pretty soon I was going no faster than I used to when I went blackberrying as a kid in the lane behind my first school.

I don't know if it was the memory of blackberry and apple tart, or the smells coming out of the various snack bars I passed, or even that blasted muffin of Allan's in my bag, but by the time I got near the big junction where the Bank of England starts I was increasingly aware of my stomach rumbling. I stopped at a little place that sells hot rolls and picked up a couple of bacon baps, one for me and one for Sarge in case he happened to be in his usual place. I was pretty sure that if he wasn't I'd have the willpower to not eat it myself. Probably. One bacon bap gets an exemption under the 'sod it, who cares, it's my last day' rule. Two, though, is probably pushing it too far. Comfort eating is only fun when it's actually comfortable, which the rush hour Tube rarely is, and I'm sorry but the calories really do still count if you bought it for someone else.

The first time I came up here the Bank impressed the hell out of me, and I suppose it still does. Come at it from the direction I was then, and you see this windowless wedge of solid stone rearing up at you, huge and intimidating and totally faceless. But at the very tip, where the building ought to narrow to a point, is something as strange and as out-of-place as a pink ribbon on the nose ring of a bull mastiff. It's almost like a little Greek temple, a covered circle with pillars that pedestrians have to walk through because it blocks the pavement.

And that's where my friend Sarge sleeps, when he hasn't begged enough for a hostel and if he doesn't get cleared away by the City police.

Sarge is an ex-squaddie – he never made it as far as sergeant, despite the name – who fought in Kuwait and Bosnia and then went a bit loopy when he left the Army. Couldn't stick at any job or in any place because he couldn't handle being told what to do any more. Couldn't stick at any relationship, either. He spends his time on a couple of sheets of corrugated cardboard in the Bank temple, watching people go past, saying hello to some and looking surprised when they reply, and hoping it doesn't rain – the temple is designed with a hole in its roof.

I know he drinks, I'm fairly sure he does drugs, he's often got a black eye or some other souvenir from a fight, and he's got a mouth on him like the Limehouse Link, but I like him. He's not some romantic figure, free of all responsibilities and living a care-free life – in fact, his thin sleeping bag often stinks of piss in the mornings – but he'll give you a straight answer to a straight question and he once told me that Mark was seven types of blind cunt for cheating on me, so he's OK in my book.

I went from saying 'good morning', to exchanging a few words, to stopping and chatting at length. The tipping point was one morning just before Christmas when he was asleep as I passed by. There was a Christmas card propped up waiting for him to find, its envelope marked 'sleepy head', and I couldn't get it out of my mind. How do you buy someone a Christmas card when you haven't even bothered to find out their name? How can you make sleeping on stone slabs in the rain sound like a child's bedtime story? The next time I saw him, I sat down with him to talk. He was tickled pink. And I learned a new thing: if you sit on the ground next to a homeless person you become as

invisible as them. Even when it's your workmates walking past, they don't look down and so they don't recognise you. Try it sometime.

Over the next few weeks we swapped life stories. I told him about Dad and Mark, he told me about his childhood pets. I bought him bacon rolls, he gave me an egg sandwich he'd been donated (he hates egg, and it was still in its plastic and before its sell-by, so I ate it). He shared with me his new, post-Army philosophy of life, which is basically “fuck them all, every one of them”. And he told me how he can no longer handle enclosed spaces, like armoured cars, public toilet cubicles or police cells.

So when I came to cross the road today and saw him in the middle of an arm-waving shouting match with two grim-looking City police constables, I knew there was trouble ahead.

They'd dumped their car on the pavement by the pillars and were standing on on either side of Sarge, trying to edge him to where they could get him into it. Every so often the one actually talking to Sarge took a step back, he advanced to fill the space without noticing what he was doing, and the second copper stepped forward to hem him in again. Neat. But I didn't reckon I wanted to be them when he realised what was going on. I mean, he was in the Army and everything.

Perhaps I could get over there and calm things down?

Stuck on the other side of the junction next to a tall building surrounded with builders' hoardings, I tried to find a gap in the traffic to dodge through. No luck. It wasn't moving fast, but it was moving steadily. I got a filthy look from a taxi driver as I shimmied through to the traffic island, but that was as far as I could get. No-one was taking any notice of what was happening, the pedestrians splitting into two streams to pour round either side of the bust-up with 'not my problem' looks on their faces.

“Hey!” I shouted, jumping up on the spot and waving in a completely unsuccessful attempt to be noticed. “Hey, watch it, he's not hurting anyone!” Nothing. No-one paying attention my way at all. And then, in a smoothly coordinated movement, the lead policeman opened the car door and the other one put his hand on the back of Sarge's head to encourage him in.

It nearly worked.

I saw Sarge tense, then throw back his head in a roar. He turned to run, and the two coppers grabbed him on instinct, one on each arm. He swivelled hard to knock one against the car, and again tried to break free. I saw one reach for a radio, the other for their baton.

I threw a shoe.

I'm not sure why. I suppose I thought if I distracted everyone from what they were doing, it'd break the tension and everything could be sorted out calmly. I couldn't get anyone to hear me when I shouted, I couldn't get over there in person, so I did the only thing I could think of.

I missed, obviously. It's not like I'd been practising or anything. The shoe bounced unnoticed off the car bonnet and into nowhere, leaving me standing on one foot, feeling a bit foolish, and the situation as bad as it ever was.

Oh well – in for a penny, in for a pound. If this didn't work I still had the muffin to have a third go with. A couple of bacon baps, too.

My second shoe hit Sarge smack on the forehead, just as he was winding up to deliver a headbutt to the taller of the two coppers. There was a stunned pause, and then all three of them swivelled to stare at me.

The staring competition went on for what seemed like forever as the signals changed and the traffic around me came to a halt, and then I broke it.

“Run, you silly bastard,” I shouted, and Sarge took off, shrugging the policemen aside and shouldering his way through pedestrians as he headed for a side street. He turned for a moment, stuck a thumb in the air, yelled “fuck the lot of them” to me, and vanished. One copper turned to follow him, the other – the one with the radio – started in my direction.

Oh shit, oh bollocks, oh bloody, bloody hell.

I backed away, finding the gap between a white van and an MX5 by touch and retreating onto the pavement, until I ran out of room against the builders' hoarding. With the policeman advancing, the look on his face suggesting a total sense of humour failure, I was seconds away from a bad day getting significantly worse.

And then, salvation.

A voice – young, Aussie accent, brisk but friendly – said, “In here, girl,” and a hand grabbed my wrist. A sharp tug, and I was being dragged through a small door in the hoarding and into the shadows of a gutted bank, cool and dark and refreshing after the choking heat outside. I caught a quick glimpse of white teeth, curled blond hair, tight jeans and the sort of body that comes from a lot of manual labour in the sun, and then we were running in the dark, me trusting him to lead the way as my eyes adjusted.

“He's all right, that Sarge is. They ought to leave him alone,” he called back over his shoulder as he led us confidently into the depths. I heard the copper shouting out after me, blundering around and cursing as he tripped on something in the gloom. We ran on silently, me shoeless and my new friend as light on his feet as a cat despite his dusty builder's boots, until we dodged behind a big central flight of stairs, left alone and proud by the removal of all the walls and partitions that once surrounded it.

He held a finger to my lips, the skin work-roughened and the nail cut neatly short. We listened. No sound of pursuit.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“No worries. Couldn't let them grab you after the shoe thing, could I? That was pretty cool.”

I managed a wonky smile: “I've never had the police after me before. I'm glad I haven't written my name on the inner soles.”

He laughed at that, and we relaxed, the danger passed.

“Where has everyone gone?” I asked, wondering at the silence. Neat piles of tools were propped up against stores of building materials and dust sheet-covered equipment was dotted here and there.

“Hell, it's Friday. They're all down the pub.”

“Oh, I know that story – Poets Day and off they go, leaving you alone. Bastards.”

He looked puzzled: “Aw, let them. They're just guys I work with, you know? Anyway, I like it when I've got the place to myself. Really something, huh?”

And he was right. Shorn of years' worth of renovations and fixes and adaptations, the building was magnificent. Cool stone floors swept into the distance, intricate plaster ceilingwork had space to breathe, and history simply oozed out of the place.

“There's another way out the back, where we bring the stuff in. But I could give you the full tour if you want,” he suggested, eyes gleaming.

Which is how I came to find myself on the roof. We explored floor after floor of deserted offices, cubbyholes, meeting rooms and corridors. I slid along long runs of smooth tiles, wrecking my tights while he doubled up with laughter. We peered out of windows into lightwells and across to offices in other buildings where the occupants were packing up for the week or settling into their chairs with loosened ties and 'I'm going to impress the boss' expressions on their faces. We found a staff common room where he chased me around the pool table and I chased the day, trying to work out how it had changed direction so suddenly.

And then we broke out onto the roof, into the sun and the cool breeze that made it the best of days up here instead of the oven it had been below. I went to the parapet and leaned over, watching the tiny figures of the pedestrians below, all bald spots and sun hats. There seemed to be a haze rising off them and I fancied it was a mix of stress and worry and sensibleness and responsibility, and it didn't seem to come any nearer to us than the second storey.

Somehow it had nothing to do with me, up here in the sky where no-one knew to look for me.

It was a big realisation, and I reached it just as, from behind me, he called out: “Come on girl, it's easy! Live a bit!”

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So I look at him, weighing up the situation, wondering what to do about this carefree youth as he bobs and bows and beckons on the end of a steel girder left jutting out from top of the building by the crane that lowered it.

I know, realistically, that I'm not going to jump him. I couldn't, not in real life, not without knowing his name. And I'm certainly not going to push him. I mean, talk about ingratitude. So what am I going to do?

He's so confident. And the beam's not that narrow – easily nine inches wide. Maybe I can do it.

No safety net, though.

Do I need one?

He's holding his hands out, but I'll have to go ten feet out over nothing before I can take them. I step up onto the beam and find the metal warm under my naked feet. For the first couple of steps I'm still over the roof. For the third, I'm not. The fourth takes me completely out over the drop. I pause.

“Don't look down!” he calls, laughing, and so of course I do. It's not as bad as I expected, actually.

The people and the cars look exactly the same as they did from the parapet. I can do this, with care.

I hope I don't fall. I hope the wind doesn't rise too much. I hope no-one's looking up my skirt.

I hope Dad's watching, wherever he is. I bet he is.

A few more swift, assured steps and I'm out as far as I can go, laughing at myself and at the situation and at everything at once.

“Do you take all your girls here?”

“Only the ones without heels on!”

“Shall we sit?” I ask, and lower myself carefully but swiftly, keeping my back straight until I can plant my hands, kick my feet away and park my bum. I can't see his face, but can I read a moment's surprise in his posture before he joins me, grinning. I don't know how we're getting back, but I expect we'll manage somehow.

As I sit there, kicking my legs idly and wondering why I hadn't had the sense to leave my bag behind instead of over my shoulder, I look out over the rooftops. All those people. I always thought I was the only one who didn't have the answers, but how many of them have done something like this? How many of them could do absolutely anything they want tomorrow?

Very faintly, a burst of laughter rolls upwards and I recognise the girls from the office, rollicking down the street like a mobile party. I wonder what they'd think if they knew about my tears, and Allan, and Sarge, and my being up here watching them, but then I realise I just don't mind any more.

It's true. They're people I worked with, no more, no less. Sarge's motto rings in my ears and I know he was right – but wrong too. If I want, I can stick two fingers up at them all and walk away. And if I don't, I can stay in touch. It really doesn't matter.

I remember Allan's story, thinking about what it would have been like if Mark and I had patched it up, or if I'd not come home early that day and we'd carried on with our occasional rows. I think about years of pretending, finally ending when one person can stand it no more. I think about Eleanor's cakes, and how Allan hadn't dreamed of the torture baking them must have become.

He's right – it is better to get it over with sometimes.

I'll have to tell him sometime – his words were far, far better than any farewell card could ever be. I suspect they'll last longer, too.

New ideas to fold away and not look at too closely for a bit, until their brightness dims a little and I can examine them properly without being blinded by the possibilities.

Right now, what I have at the moment is good enough. I dig the two bacon rolls out of my bag and hand one my companion. He takes it and smiles his thanks.

“I've got a muffin for afters, if you want it,” I say, happily.