

Intimate Dialogues - "Ledge"

by Vincent Eaton

It was a mildly windy day of the working week in the financial district of the city—the bright morning sun was out—when a security guard was called to the fifteenth floor to deal with a disruption.

"This way."

Someone pointed to a desk. At the desk, someone pointed to a person standing by a window. At the window, the person pointed outside. The security guard moved his head out the window. Looked right and then left and there stood a man on the ledge of the building looking into the distance. Feeling the look, the man turned his head.

"Hi," he said. His hands were flat against the building, as was his bottom, his back, legs, except for his head, which leaned forward with interest to gaze at the ground all that way below.

"What are you doing?" the guard asked.

"Whipping up some batter for hot cakes. Want some?"

The guard withdrew his head and turned to not one but fourteen people staring at him with expectation.

"I can't deal with this. We'll have to call experts."

A businessman wearing an expensive tie and haircut, who seemed used to giving orders with expectations of fairly quick results, stepped forward to rattle off, "The call has been made to the city's emergency services. However we don't have anyone here to handle this. As the crisis unfolds."

"As the crisis unfolds?"

"He refuses to speak to us," the man continued, "and when we try to reason with him, he threatens to jump."

"Who are you, this 'us'?"

"His colleagues."

“What do you do here?”

“On this floor our multinational institution deals with strategy and policy in the defense industry. Is that relevant?”

“I don't know. Hang on.”

The guard leaned out the window again and took a longer look at the man. “How we doing out here?”

The man said, “Still here. Waiting for my wings to sprout.”

“Don't jump,” the security guard tried.

“This is how I see the end of my movie.”

“Sorry?”

“I'm going to. Anything you think up to say is not going to matter. I have my plans.”

“Well. Please don't jump...?”

“Oh. If you're going to be polite about it, then to hell with my carefully thought out suicide strategy.”

The security guard leaned out just a little bit more.

“I just need to inform you that this is not my job. I don't know how to handle this.”

The man standing on the ledge looked over.

“You're incompetent?”

“I'm a security guard.”

“So?”

“I check people in and out of the building. I respond to small security requests. I have a flashlight, some keys. And a mobile phone with emergency numbers.”

“Well, welcome to your life.” The man on the ledge edged forward.

“Don't!”

“What?”

“Jump.”

“Why not?”

The security guard's teeth came out to scrap along his bottom lip. “I don't know why not.”

"Then you're just what I need." The man looked down fifteen floors of air and potential freefall, with cement at the end to break his fall. "Yeah, I can do this."

The security guard attempted another tack.

"What's your name?"

"I'm not looking for a relationship. Sorry. It's not personal, just permanent."

"Is it something these guys, your colleagues, did? Or said? Tell me and I maybe I can straighten them out."

"Oh this is not about them. This is about me. And it's about a number of things that are just going on everywhere in the world."

"You want to talk about it?"

"This is where I have to become rude and say fuck you."

The security guard sighed, and considered his predicament.

"Listen, mister. I don't know what to do here. Would you mind not jumping until someone else comes?"

"You don't want anybody jumping off buildings on your watch, that it? So what's that other person following you going to do? Talk me out of taking the next big leap?"

"Yes. They have special people for this."

The man on the ledge murmured this last sentence. "...special people for this. Am I, this act, a 'this'. That's it?"

"I didn't mean it that way. It was just the way it came out."

The man took his butt away from the building.

The security guard reached out. "Steady. Hold it. Get your butt glued back to the building." The man looked with a slight smile at his guardian. "You heard me," the security guard insisted. "Butt to the wall, mister, or else. Do it!"

"I like it when you're forceful with me." He slowly placed his butt against the wall.

"Yeah. Right. Good."

"You're doing all right for someone who doesn't know what he's doing."

“And you're awfully talkative for someone with suicidal tendencies.” The guard turned his head to look back into the office, wanting some clarification and helpful background information, and to make sure this wasn't some joke being pulled on him. “Is this guy always so—” He halted, hearing the voice of the guy on the ledge say something. He swung his head away from those startled faces within. “What? You say something?”

“I always talk a lot when I'm nervous, that's why I'm talking. I'm nervous, *why* I don't have the faintest of ideas, do you? Sorry if I don't fit into your motion picture idea of the taciturn man with heavily furrowed brow and leaping in his loins, but scattered talking is what comes out so unexpectedly. You want a stereotype that matches your rather limited, sorry to say, preconceptions, go check some other ledge on this building, where I'm sure you'll find someone waiting for you with whom you would be more comfortable with.”

The guard let the wind go down on this.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Okay.”

“If I were going to be really rude, I could say you aren't exactly my ideal either, what I had in mind to save my life when I strolled out here.”

“I said okay, okay.”

“It's a two way street, this disappointment with expectations and individual human failings.”

“Well.”

“So there.”

“Got that off your chest?”

“I feel relieved. A certain weight lifted—”

“Enough to come in out of what you're doing?”

The man on the ledge slowly turned his head to gaze with mild amusement at his saviour. “Man, you really have just no idea what you're dealing with here.”

“You're just full of news bulletins, aren't you?” The guard ran his hand over his face, his eyes dashing about in the sky, seeking another better move.

"I've hurt your feelings."

"No, I'm a professional."

"Now you're Mister Tough Guy. Listen, I wish we had more time to get acquainted to find out what makes us tick, but..." A foot lifted forward and dangled over the abyss.

"No!"

In vast slow motion, he stepped back, a smile flickering.

"You care," said the man on the ledge.

The security guard leaned against the window jamb, already feeling drained. "What do you do? In here?" He indicated the office in back of him.

"What do I do? What's my name? Are you trying to pick me up? Or you're going to headhunt me with a better job offer? If I told you I'm a nuclear physicist, would that matter?"

"You're a nuclear physic—I'm so nervous I can barely say it. A nuclear physicist? So why would you want to kill yourself?"

"To investigate the dispersion of molecules upon impact."

The security guard let a bit of time go by after this. "You are putting me on?"

"Give this man a promotion!" the man on the ledge shouted to the people gathering in the streets way below.

The security guard turned to the people inside. "This is not my job. I can't do this." He leaned outside to man again. "This is not my job."

"Sorry it's you."

"If you jump and die, it'll be my fault."

"You mean my suicide is going to be a bad career move for you?"

The man on the ledge seemed to relax an inch. "I'll help you. The strategy here is to remain positive. Look on me as your suicide training wheels. The first one you lost but taught you a lot. This could actually be a good career starter. Look at your time with me like being a psychotherapist on speed. I'd write you a letter of recommendation, but alas I'm not going to be around for follow-up calls to verify my considered opinion."

"How can you make jokes at a time like this?"

"Because it's my life, my suicide, my movie. You're a helpless spectator. And don't think I don't notice that you've gotten me talking, and stalling, which is good, I think that's the way this is supposed to work. So maybe you have an aptitude for this line of work."

"No," the security guard said, shaking his head, "I already know I hate this. I don't ever want to do this again."

"So what do we do? I mean, in the next minute or two before I jump."

"Well. I. Maybe. Tell me why you're doing this so I can explain it when I'm asked."

"I want to know what my molecules will feel like when they bounce apart. Wonder if they're like marbles dropped on a marble slab."

"Now, you see, that's way beyond me."

"How so?"

"Seems you want to do an experiment you won't be around to know the result of."

The man thought about this. "Good. You caught me out. We're making progress. And we're having fun. Okay. Let's approach it from another angle. At what point, upon impact with the cement, does the intricate dance of sentience in my brain turn into inert mush?"

"No. No, I really don't know any of this stuff," the guard muttered.

"Upon impact, will you come down quick and say bye-bye to the me of my brain dripping over the curb?"

The security guard gave the man a long, incredulous look. "You're gross, mister. Real black, real dark."

"Does that indicate a refusal? I die alone?" The man suddenly shifted his body forward as though taking off.

"Don't!"

The man smiled. "Just seeing whether you're paying attention. Tell me, do I get to ask you questions, or is this just one way?"

"Sure you can ask me questions. I've run out of questions."

"Do you believe in God and an afterlife?"

“Sure.” The guard tried to be agreeable, not knowing where any of this was heading. “Like on my birthdays, and when I get real scared. Like now.”

“So you believe in God and an afterlife right now?”

“For you I do.”

“How nice. How thoughtful.”

A moment passed, a light breeze ruffled the hair of the man on the ledge.

“I’m not a nuclear physicist.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I’m an astrophysicist.”

“Should I believe this one?”

“No. Believe nothing I say. I cannot be in my right mind, can I?” He stared longingly downward. “Here’s a question. Do maggots live on leftover body force? Or will I be just so much mincemeat?” The man looked over. “Here’s what you can tell whoever why I’m doing this. You can be my suicide note. Oral tradition. Tell them I spent too much time on the Internet. Research, porn, emails. I did too much overtime. I made up too many excuses and checked the clock too often. And I thought about a girlfriend from high school recently. I need to be dead.”

“Now I don’t know the first thing about how to respond to that and make you feel like life is worth living.”

“Good.”

“What was the girlfriend’s name?”

“Who?”

“In high school.”

“Janet.”

The guard nodded.

“Why’d you ask?” the man on the ledge asked.

“Curious. Just wanted to know.”

The man looked at him suspiciously. The guard insisted. “I wasn’t going anywhere with it.”

“Oh.” The man looked up, around. Then downward once more. “The tempting inclination earthward is growing.”

“What?”

“Along with an intermediate faltering impulse to stay standing and try another twenty-four hours. But if I do that, if I don't jump, they'll put me in an institution, with drugs, and observe me. Bottom line, I'm not really straining to hold on to the last links to life. It's rather exhilarating to say goodbye to life with zest. Fall with a smile.”

“You're saying these things again, Mister.”

“Am I?”

“Things that are going all sorts of ways.”

“Life is going to abandon these bones.”

The security guard looked back into the office, looking for help and guidance and only found the same concerned faces of unmoving panic expecting the best from him.

Then the door opened on the far side of the room, the same door he had come in. People in real uniforms with determined faces rushed in. People who knew things and possessed the right experience for such matters.

With a brighter face, the security guard turned back to the ledge outside, but there was nothing or anyone on the ledge now. He felt the light wind ruffling his hair.

