

suicide coast

M. JOHN HARRISON

M. John Harrison is not a prolific writer, and, in America, at least, is still little known to the SF readership at large. In Britain, however, he has been an influential figure behind the scenes since the days of Michael Moor-cock's New Worlds in the late '60s, and has had a disproportionate effect with a relatively small body of work; in fact, recently he was given the Richard Evans Memorial Award, a new award designed to honor just that sort of career and reputation. Harrison made his first sale to New Worlds in 1968, and by 1975 had sold two science fiction novels, The Committed Men and The Centauri Device, and published a collection of his early short work, The Machine in Shaft Ten and Other Stories. It was the stories and novels he produced during the 70s and early '80s, though, on the shifting and amorphous borderland of science fiction and fantasy, that would prove to be his most influential genre-related work. In The Pastel City, A Storm of Wings, In Viriconium, and in the stories that would go into the collection Viriconium Nights, he produced a sort of bizarre, heightened, intellectual, stylishly perverse sword & sorcery, kin to the mannered, elegant, fin de siècle science fantasy of Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun, Aldiss's The Malacia Tapestry, and Vance's The Dying Earth, creating a mood of autumnal sadness and of the evocative strangeness and dislocation of a world seen through the lens of millennia of elapsed time that is similar to the emotional tone and color of those books, and sustains it with com-parable skill.

In recent years, he has turned away from genre work to produce some of the best books of his career in a sequence of ostensibly "mainstream" novels (although, ironically, most of them contain subtle fantastic elements) such as Climbers, The Course of the Heart, and, most recently, the critically acclaimed Signs of Life. In the intense and lapidarian story that follows, a rare foray into core science fiction, he takes us to a gray, rain-swept, rather dispirited future London, for a sharp lesson in the difference that Passion makes in all our lives, no matter where we choose to invest it.

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four-thirty in the afternoon in a converted warehouse near Mile End under-ground station. Heavy, persistent summer rain was falling on the roof. Inside, the air was still and humid, dark despite the fluorescent lights. It smelled of sweat, dust, gymnasts' chalk. Twenty-five feet above the thick blue crash-mats, a boy with dreadlocks and baggy knee-length shorts was supporting his entire weight on two fingers of his right hand. The muscles of his upper back, black and shiny with sweat, fanned out exotically with the effort, like the hood of a cobra or the shell of a crab. One leg trailed behind him for balance. He had raised the other so that the knee was almost touching his chin. For two or three minutes he had been trying to get the ball of his foot in the same place as his fingers. Each time he moved, his center of gravity shifted and he had to go back to a resting position. Eventually he said quietly:

"I'm coming off."

We all looked up. It was a slow afternoon in Mile End. Nobody bothers much with training in the middle of summer. Some teenagers were in from the local schools and colleges. A couple of men in their late thirties had sneaked out of a civil engineering contract near Cannon Street. Everyone was tired. Humidity had made the handholds slippery. Despite that, a serious atmosphere prevailed.

"Go on," we encouraged him. "You can do it."

We didn't know him, or one another, from Adam.

"Go on!"

The boy on the wall laughed. He was good but not that good. He didn't want to fall off in front of everyone. An intention tremor moved through his bent leg. Losing patience with himself, he scraped at the foothold with the toe of his boot. He lunged upward. His body pivoted away from the wall and dropped onto the mats, which, absorbing the energy of the fall, made a sound like a badly winded heavyweight boxer. Chalk and dust billowed up. He got to his feet, laughing and shaking his dreadlocks.

"I can never do that."

“You’ll get it in the end,” I told him. “Me, I’m going to fall off this roof once more then fuck off home. It’s too hot in here.”

“See you, man.”

* * * *

I had spent most of that winter in London, assembling copy for MAX, a Web site that fronted the adventure sports software industry. They were always interested in stuff about cave diving, BASE jumping, snowboarding, hang-gliding, ATB and so on: but they didn’t want to know about rock climbing.

“Not enough to buy,” my editor said succinctly. “And too obviously skill-based.” He leafed through my samples. “The punter needs equipment to invest in. It strengthens his self-image. With the machine parked in his hall, he believes he could disconnect from the software and still do the sport.” He tapped a shot of Isobelle Patissier seven hundred feet up some knife-edge arête in Colorado. “Where’s the hardware? These are just bodies.”

“The boots are pretty high tech.”

“Yeah? And how much a pair? Fifty, a hundred and fifty? Mick, we can get them to lay out three grand for the *frame* of an ATB.”

He thought for a moment. Then he said: “We might do something with the women.”

“The good ones are French.”

“Even better.”

I gathered the stuff together and put it away.

“I’m off then,” I said.

“You still got the 190?”

I nodded.

“Take care in that thing,” he said.

“I will.”

“Focke Wolf 190,” he said. “Hey.”

“It’s a Mercedes,” I said.

He laughed. He shook his head.

“Focke Wolf, Mercedes, no one drives themselves anymore,” he said. ‘You mad fucker.’”

He looked round his office —a dusty metal desk, a couple of posters with the MAX logo, a couple of PCs. He said: “No one comes in here in person anymore. You ever hear of the modem?”

“Once or twice,” I said.

“Well they’ve invented it now.”

I looked around too.

“One day,” I said, “the poor wankers are going to want back what you stole from them.”

“Come on. They pissed it all away long before we arrived.”

As I left the office he advised:

“Keep walking the walk, Mick.”

I looked at my watch. It was late and the MAX premises were in ECI. But I thought that if I got a move on and cut up through Tottenham, I could go and see a friend of mine. His name was Ed and I had known him since the 1980s.

* * * *

Back then, I was trying to write a book about people like him. Ed Johnson sounded interesting. He had done everything from roped-access engineering in Telford to harvesting birds’ nests for soup in Southeast Asia. But he was hard to pin down. If I was in Birmingham, he was in Exeter. If we were both in London, he had something else to do. In the end it was Moscow Davis who made the introduction. Moscow was a short, hard, cheerful girl with big feet and bedraggled hair. She was barely out of her teens. She had come from Oldham, I think, originally, and she had an

indescribable snuffling accent. She and Ed had worked as steeplejacks together before they both moved down from the north in search of work. They had once been around a lot together. She thought Johnson would enjoy talking to me if I was still interested. I was. The arrangement we made was to be on the lookout for him in one of the Suicide Coast pubs, the Harbour Lights, that Sunday afternoon.

“Sunday afternoons are quiet, so we can have a chat,” said Moscow. “Everyone’s eating their dinner then.”

We had been in the pub for half an hour when Johnson arrived, wearing patched 501s and a dirty T-shirt with a picture of a mole on the front of it. He came over to our table and began kicking morosely at the legs of Moscow’s chair. The little finger of his left hand was splinted and wrapped in a wad of bandage.

“This is Ed,” Moscow told me, not looking at him.

“Fuck off, Moscow,” Ed told her, not looking at me. He scratched his armpit and stared vaguely into the air above Moscow’s head. “I want my money back,” he said. Neither of them could think of anything to add to this, and after a pause he wandered off.

“He’s always like that,” Moscow said. ‘You don’t want to pay any attention.’ Later in the afternoon she said: “You’ll get on we’ll with Ed, though. You’ll like him. He’s a mad bastard.”

“You say that about all the boys,” I said.

In this case Moscow was right, because I had heard it not just from her, and later I would get proof of it anyway—if you can ever get proof of anything. Every-one said that Ed should be in a straightjacket. In the end, nothing could be arranged. Johnson was in a bad mood, and Moscow had to be up the Coast that week, on Canvey Island, to do some work on one of the cracking-plants there. There was always a lot of that kind of work, oil work, chemical work, on Canvey Island. “I haven’t time for him,” Moscow explained as she got up to go. “I’ll see you later, anyway,” she promised.

As soon as she was gone, Ed Johnson came back and sat down in front of me. He grinned. “Ever done anything worth doing in your whole life?” he asked me. “Anything real?”

* * * *

The MAX editor was right: since coring got popular, the roads had been deserted. I left ECI and whacked the 190 up through Hackney until I got the Lea Valley reservoirs on my right like a splatter of moonlit verglas. On empty roads the only mistakes that need concern you are your own; every bend becomes a dreamy interrogation of your own technique. Life should be more like that. I made good time. Ed lived just back from Montagu Road, in a quiet street behind the Jewish Cemetery. He shared his flat with a woman in her early thirties whose name was Caitlin. Caitlin had black hair and soft, honest brown eyes. She and I were old friends. We hugged briefly on the doorstep. She looked up and down the street and shivered.

“Come in,” she said. “It’s cold.”

“You should wear a jumper.”

“I’ll tell him you’re here,” she said. “Do you want some coffee?”

Caitlin had softened the edges of Ed’s life, but less perhaps than either of them had hoped. His taste was still very minimal—white paint, ash floors, one or two items of furniture from Heals. And there was still a competition Klein mounted on the living room wall, its polished aerospace alloys glittering in the halogen lights.

“Espresso,” I said.

“I’m not giving you espresso at this time of night. You’ll explode.”

“It was worth a try.”

“Ed!” she called. “Ed! Mick’s here!”

He didn’t answer.

She shrugged at me, as if to say, “What can I do?” and went into the back room. I heard their voices but not what they were saying. After that she went upstairs. “Go in and see him,” she suggested when she came down again three or four minutes later. “I told him you were here.” She had pulled a Jigsaw sweater on over her Racing Green shirt and Levi’s; and fastened her hair back hastily with a dark brown velvet scrunchy.

“That looks nice,” I said. “Do you want me to fetch him out?”

“I doubt he’ll come.”

The back room was down a narrow corridor. Ed had turned it into a bleak combination of office and storage. The walls were done with one coat of what builders call “obliterating emulsion” and covered with metal shelves. Chipped diving tanks hollow with the ghosts of exotic gases were stacked by the filing cabinet. His BASE chute spilled half out of its pack, yards of cold nylon a vile but exciting rose color—a color which made you want to be hurtling downward face-first screaming with fear until you heard the canopy bang out behind you and you knew you weren’t going to die that day (although you might still break both legs). The cheap beige carpet was strewn with high-access mess—hanks of graying static rope; a yellow bucket stuffed with tools; Ed’s Petzl stop, harness and knocked-about CPTs. Everything was layered with dust. The radiators were turned off. There was a bed made up in one corner. Deep in the clutter on the cheap white desk stood a 5-gig Mac with a screen to design industry specs. It was spraying Ed’s face with icy blue light.

“Hi Ed.”

“Hi Mick.”

There was a long silence after that. Ed stared at the screen. I stared at his back. Just when I thought he had forgotten I was there, he said:

“Fuck off and talk to Caitlin a moment.”

“I brought us some beer.”

“That’s great.”

“What are you running here?”

“It’s a game. I’m running a game, Mick.”

Ed had lost weight since I last saw him. Though they retained their distinctive cabled structure, his forearms were a lot thinner. Without releasing him from anything it represented, the yoke of muscle had lifted from his shoulders. I had expected that. But I was surprised by how much flesh had melted off his face, leaving long vertical lines of sinew, fins of bone above the cheeks and at the corners of the jaw. His eyes were a long way back in his head. In a way it suited him. He would have seemed okay—a little tired perhaps; a little burned down, like someone who was working too hard—if it hadn’t been for the light from the display. Hunched in his chair with that splashing off him, he looked like a vam-pire. He looked like a junkie.

I peered over his shoulder.

“You were never into this shit,” I said.

He grinned.

“Everyone’s into it now. Why not me? Wanking away and pretending it’s sex.”

“Oh, come on.”

He looked down at himself.

“It’s better than living,” he said.

There was no answer to that.

I went and asked Caitlin, “Has he been doing this long?”

“Not long,” she said. “Have some coffee.”

We sat in the L-shaped living area drinking decaffeinated Java. The sofa was big enough for Caitlin to curl up in a corner of it like a cat. She had turned the overhead lights off, tucked her bare feet up under her. She was smoking a cigarette. “It’s been a bloody awful day,” she warned me. “So don’t say a word.” She grinned wryly, then we both looked up at the Klein for a minute or two. Some kind of ambient music was issuing faintly from the stereo speakers, full of South American bird calls and bouts of muted drumming. “Is he winning?” she asked.

“He didn’t tell me.”

“You’re lucky. It’s all he ever tells me.”

“Aren’t you worried?” I said.

She smiled.

“He’s still using a screen,” she said. “He’s not plugging in.”

“Yet,” I said.

“Yet,” she agreed equably. “Want more coffee? Or will you do me a

favor?"

I put my empty cup on the floor.

"Do you a favor," I said.

"Cut my hair."

I got up and went to her end of the sofa. She turned away from me so I could release her hair from the scrunchy. "Shake it," I said. She shook it. She ran her hands through it. Perfume came up; something I didn't recognize. "It doesn't need much," I said. I switched the overhead light back on and fetched a kitchen chair. "Sit here. No, right in the light. You'll have to take your jumper off."

"The good scissors are in the bathroom," she said.

Cut my hair. She had asked me that before, two or three days after she decided we should split up. I remembered the calm that came over me at the gentle, careful sound of the scissors, the way her hair felt as I lifted it away from the nape of her neck, the tenderness and fear because everything was changing around the two of us forever and somehow this quiet action signalized and blessed that. The shock of these memories made me ask:

"How are you two getting on?"

She lowered her head to help me cut. I felt her smile.

"You and Ed always liked the same kind of girls," she said.

"Yes," I said.

I finished the cut, then lightly kissed the nape of her neck. "There," I said. Beneath the perfume she smelled faintly of hypoallergenic soap and unscented deodorants. "No, Mick," she said softly. "Please." I adjusted the collar of her shirt, let her hair fall back round it. My hand was still on her shoulder. She had to turn her head at an awkward angle to look up at me. Her eyes were wide and full of pain. "Mick." I kissed her mouth and brushed the side of her face with my fin-gertips. Her arms went round my neck, I felt her settle in the chair. I touched her breasts. They were warm,, the cotton shirt was clean and cool. She made a small noise and pulled me closer. Just then, in the back room among the dusty air tanks and disused parachutes, Ed Johnson fell out of his chair and began to thrash about, the

back of his head thudding rhythmically on the floor.

Caitlin pushed me away.

“Ed?” she called, from the passage door.

“Help!” cried Ed.

“I’ll go,” I said.

Caitlin put her arm across the doorway and stared up at me calmly.

“No,” she said.

“How can you lift him on your own?”

“This is me and Ed,” she said.

“For God’s sake!”

“It’s late, Mick. I’ll let you out, then I’ll go and help him.”

At the front door I said:

“I think you’re mad. Is this happening a lot? You’re a fool to let him do this.”

“It’s his life.”

I looked at her. She shrugged.

“Will you be all right?” I said.

When I offered to kiss her goodbye, she turned her face away.

“Fuck off then, both of you,” I said.

I knew which game Ed was playing, because I had seen the software wrapper discarded on the desk near his Mac. Its visuals were cheap and schematic, its values self-consciously retro. It was nothing like the stuff we sold off the MAX site, which was quite literally the experience itself, stripped of its consequences. You had to plug in for that: you had to be cored. This was just a game; less a game, even, than a trip. You flew a silvery V-shaped graphic down an endless V-shaped corridor, a notional

perspective sometimes bounded by lines of objects, sometimes just by lines, sometimes bounded only by your memory of boundaries. Sometimes the graphic floated and munched like a moth. Sometimes it traveled in flat vicious arcs at an apparent Mach 5. There were no guns, no opponent. There was no competition. You flew. Sometimes the horizon tilted one way, sometimes the other. You could choose your own music. It was a bleakly minimal experience. But after a minute or two, five at the most, you felt as if you could fly your icon down the perspective forever, to the soundtrack of your own life.

It was quite popular.

It was called *Out There*.

“Rock climbing is theater,” I once wrote.

It had all the qualities of theater, I went on, but a theater-in-reverse:

“In obedience to some devious vanished script, the actors abandon the stage and begin to scale the seating arrangements, the balconies and hanging boxes now occupied only by cleaning women.”

“Oh, very deep,” said Ed Johnson when he read this. “Shall I tell you what’s wrong here? Eh? Shall I tell you?”

“Piss off, Ed.”

“If you fall on your face from a hundred feet up, it comes off the front of your head *and you don’t get a second go*. Next to that, theater is wank. Theater is flat. Theater is *Suicide Coast*.”

Ed hated anywhere flat. “Welcome to the Suicide Coast,” he used to say when I first knew him. To start with, that had been because he lived in Canterbury. But it had quickly become his way of describing most places, most experiences. You didn’t actually have to be near the sea. Suicide Coast syndrome had caused Ed to do some stupid things in his time. One day, when he and Moscow still worked in roped-access engineering together, they were going up in the lift to the top of some shitty council high rise in Birmingham or Bristol, when suddenly Ed said:

“Do you bet me I can keep the doors open with my head?”

“What?”

“Next floor! When the doors start to close, do you bet me I can stop them with my head?”

It was Monday morning. The lift smelled of piss. They had been hand-ripping mastic out of expansion joints for two weeks, using Stanley knives. Moscow was tired, hung over, weighed down by a collection of CPTs, mastic guns and hundred-foot coils of rope. Her right arm was numb from repeating the same action hour after hour, day after day.

“Fuck off, Ed,” she said.

But she knew Ed would do it whether she took the bet or not.

* * * *

Two or three days after she first introduced me to Ed, Moscow telephoned me. She had got herself a couple of weeks cutting out on Thamesmead Estate. “They don’t half work hard, these fuckers,” she said. We talked about that for a minute or two then she asked:

“Well?”

“Well what, Moscow?”

“Ed. Was he what you were looking for, then? Or what?”

I said that though I was impressed I didn’t think I would be able to write anything about Ed.

“He’s a mad fucker, though, isn’t he?”

“Oh he is,” I said. “He certainly is.”

The way Moscow said “isn’t he” made it sound like “innie.”

Another thing I once wrote:

“Climbing takes place in a special kind of space, the rules of which are simple. You must be able to see immediately what you have to lose; and you must choose the risk you take.”

What do I know?

I know that a life without consequences isn’t a life at all. Also, if you

want to do something difficult, something real, you can't shirk the pain. What I learned in the old days, from Ed and Moscow, from Gabe King, Justine Townsend and all the others who taught me to climb rock or jump off buildings or stay the right way up in a tube of pitch-dark water two degrees off freezing and two hundred feet under the ground, was that you can't just plug in and be a star: you have to practice. You have to keep loading your fingers until the tendons swell.

So it's back to the Mile End wall, with its few thousand square feet of board and bolt-on holds, its few thousand cubic meters of emphysemic air through which one very bright ray of sun sometimes falls in the middle of the afternoon, illuminating nothing much at all. Back to the sound of the fan heater, the dust-filled Akai radio playing some mournful aggressive thing, and every so often a boy's voice saying softly, "Oh shit," as some sequence or other fails to work out. You go back there, and if you have to fall off the same ceiling move thirty times in an afternoon, that's what you do. The mats give their gusty wheeze, chalk dust flies up, the fan heater above the Monkey House door rattles and chokes and flatlines briefly before puttering on.

"Jesus Christ. I don't know why I do this."

* * * *

Caitlin telephoned me.

"Come to supper," she said.

"No," I said.

"Mick, why?"

"Because I'm sick of it."

"Sick of what?"

"You. Me. Him. Everything."

"Look," she said, "he's sorry about what happened last time."

"Oh, *he's* sorry."

"We're both sorry, Mick."

“All right, then: I’m sorry, too.”

There was a gentle laugh at the other end.

“So you should be.”

I went along all the deserted roads and got there at about eight, to find a brand-new motorcycle parked on the pavement outside the house. It was a Kawasaki *Ninja*. Its fairing had been removed, to give it the look of a ‘60s cafe racer, but no one was fooled. Even at a glance it appeared too hunched, too short-coupled: too knowing. The remaining plastics shone with their own harsh inner light.

Caitlin met me on the doorstep. She put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me. “Mm,” she said. She was wearing white tennis shorts and a soft dark blue sweatshirt.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” I said.

She smiled and pushed me away.

“My hands smell of garlic,” she said.

Just as we were going inside, she turned back and nodded at the Kawa.

“That thing,” she said.

“It’s a motorcycle, Caitlin.”

“It’s his.”

I stared at her.

“Be enthusiastic,” she said. “Please.”

“But—”

“Please?”

* * * *

The main course was penne with mushrooms in an olive and tomato sauce. Ed had cooked it, Caitlin said, but she served. Ed pushed his chair over to

the table and rubbed his hands. He picked his plate up and passed it under his nose. "Wow!" he said. As we ate, we talked about this and that. The Kawa was behind everything we said, but Ed wouldn't mention it until I did. Caitlin smiled at us both. She shook her head as if to say: "Children! You children!" It was like Christmas, and she was the parent. The three of us could feel Ed's excitement and impatience. He grinned secretively. He glanced up from his food at one or both of us; quickly back down again. Finally, he couldn't hold back any longer.

"What do you think, then?" he said. "What do you think, Mick?"

"I think this is good pasta," I said. "For a cripple."

He grinned and wiped his mouth.

"It's not bad," he said, "is it?"

"I think what I like best is the way you've let the mushrooms take up a touch of sesame oil."

"Have some more. There's plenty."

"That's new to me in Italian food," I said. "Sesame oil."

Ed drank some more beer.

"It was just an idea," he said.

"You children," said Caitlin. She shook her head. She got up and took the plates away. "There's ice cream for pudding," she said over her shoulder just before she disappeared. When I was sure she was occupied in the kitchen I said:

"Nice idea, Ed: a motorcycle. What are you going to do with it? Hang it on the wall with the Klein?"

He drank the rest of his beer, opened a new one and poured it thoughtfully into his glass. He watched the bubbles rising through it, then grinned at me as if he had made a decision. He had. In that moment I saw that he was lost, but not what I could do about it.

"Isn't it brilliant? Isn't it just a *fucker*, that bike? I haven't had a bike since I was seventeen. There's a story attached to that."

“Ed—”

“Do you want to hear it or not?”

Caitlin came back in with the ice cream and served it out to us and sat down.

“Tell us, Ed,” she said tiredly. “Tell us the story about that.”

Ed held on to his glass hard with both hands and stared into it for a long time as if he was trying to see the past there. “I had some ace times on bikes when I was a kid,” he said finally: “but they were always someone else’s. My old dear— She really hated bikes, my old dear. You know: they were dirty, they were dan-gerous, she wasn’t going to have one in the house. Did that stop me? It did not. I bought one of the first good Ducatti 125s in Britain, but I had to keep it in a coal cellar down the road.”

“That’s really funny, Ed.”

“Fuck off, Mick. I’m seventeen, I’m still at school, and I’ve got this fucking *projectile* stashed in someone’s coal cellar. The whole time I had it, the old dear never knew. I’m walking three miles in the piss-wet rain every night, dressed to go to the library, then unlocking this thing and *stuffing* it round the back lanes with my best white shortie raincoat ballooning up like a fucking tent.”

He looked puzzledly down at his plate.

“What’s this? Oh. Ice cream. Ever ridden a bike in a raincoat?” he asked Caitlin.

Caitlin shook her head. She was staring at him with a hypnotized expression; she was breaking wafers into her ice cream.

“Well they were all the rage then,” he said.

He added: “The drag’s enormous.”

“Eat your pudding, Ed,” I said. “And stop boasting. How fast would a 125 go in those days? Eighty miles an hour? Eighty-five?”

“They went faster if you ground your teeth, Mick,” Ed said. “Do you want to hear the rest?”

“Of course I want to hear it, Ed.”

“Walk three miles in the piss-wet rain,” said Ed, “to go for a ride on a motorbike, what a joke. But the real joke is this: the fucker had an alloy crankcase. That was a big deal in those days, an alloy crankcase. The first time I dropped it on a bend, it cracked. Oil everywhere. I pushed it back to the coal-house and left it there. You couldn’t weld an alloy crankcase worth shit in those days. I had three years’ payments left to make on a bunch of scrap.”

He grinned at us triumphantly.

“Ask me how long I’d had it,” he ordered.

“How long, Mick?”

“Three weeks. I’d had the fucker three weeks.”

He began to laugh. Suddenly, his face went so white it looked green. He looked rapidly from side to side, like someone who can’t understand where he is. At the same time, he pushed himself up out of the wheelchair until his arms wouldn’t straighten any further and he was almost standing up. He tilted his head back until the tendons in his neck stood out. He shouted, “I want to get out of here! Caitlin, I want to get out!” Then his arms buckled and he let his weight go onto his feet and his legs folded up like putty and he fell forward with a gasp, his face in the ice cream and his hands smashing and clutching and scraping at anything they touched on the dinner table until he had bunched the cloth up under him and everything was a sodden mess of food and broken dishes, and he had slipped out of the chair and onto the floor. Then he let himself slump and go quite still.

“Help me,” said Caitlin.

We couldn’t get him back into the chair. As we tried, his head flopped forward, and I could see quite clearly the bruises and deep, half-healed scabs at the base of his skull, where they had cored his cervical spine for the computer connection. When he initialized *Out There* now the graphics came up live in his head. No more screen. Only the endless V of the perspective. The endless, effortless dip-and-bank of the viewpoint. What did he see out there? Did he see himself, hunched up on the Kawasaki *Ninja*? Did he see highways, bridges, tunnels, weird motorcycle flights through endless space?

* * * *

Halfway along the passage, he woke up.

“Caitlin!” he shouted.

“I’m here.”

“Caitlin!”

“I’m here, Ed.”

“Caitlin, I never did any of that.”

“Hush, Ed. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Listen!” he shouted. *“Listen.”*

He started to thrash about and we had to lay him down where he was. The passage was so narrow his head hit one wall, then the other, with a solid noise. He stared desperately at Caitlin, his face smeared with Ben & Jerry’s. “I never could ride a bike,” he admitted. “I made all that up.”

She bent down and put her arms round his neck.

“I know,” she said.

“I made all that up!” he shouted.

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

We got him into bed in the back room. She wiped the ice cream off his face with a Kleenex. He stared over her shoulder at the wall, rigid with fear and self-loathing. “Hush,” she said. “You’re all right.” That made him cry; him crying made her cry. I didn’t know whether to cry or laugh. I sat down and watched them for a moment, then got to my feet. I felt tired.

“It’s late,” I said. “I think I’ll go.”

Caitlin followed me out onto the doorstep. It was another cold night. Condensation had beaded on the fuel tank of the Kawasaki, so that it looked like some sort of frosted confection in the streetlight.

“Look,” she said, “can you do anything with that?”

I shrugged.

“It’s still brand new,” I said. I drew a line in the condensation, along the curve of the tank, then another, at an angle to it.

“I could see if the dealer would take it back.”

“Thanks.”

I laughed.

“Go in now,” I advised her. “It’s cold.”

“Thanks, Mick. Really.”

“That’s what you always say.”

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The way Ed got his paraplegia was this. It was a miserable January about four months after Caitlin left me to go and live with him. He was working over in mid-Wales with Moscow Davis. They had landed the inspection contract for three point-blocks owned by the local council; penalty clauses meant they had to complete that month. They lived in a bed-and-breakfast place a mile from the job, coming back so tired in the evening that they just about had time to eat fish and chips and watch *Coronation Street* before they fell asleep with their mouths open. “We were too fucked even to take drugs,” Ed admitted afterward, in a kind of wonder. “Can you imagine that?” Their hands were bashed and bleeding from hitting themselves with sample hammers in the freezing rain. At the end of every afternoon the sunset light caught a thin, delicate layer of water-ice that had welded Moscow’s hair to her cheek. Ed wasn’t just tired, he was missing Caitlin. One Friday he said, “I’m fucked off with this, let’s have a weekend at home.”

“We agreed we’d have to work weekends,” Moscow reminded him. She watched a long string of snot leave her nose, stretch out like spider-silk, then snap and vanish on the wind. “To finish in time,” she said.

“Come on, you wanker,” Ed said. “Do something real in your life.”

“I never wank,” said Moscow. “I can’t fancy myself.”

They got in her 1984 320i with the M-Technic pack, Garrett turbo and extra-wide wheels, and while the light died out of a bad afternoon she

pushed it eastward through the Cambrians, letting the rear end hang out on corners. She had Lou Reed *Retro* on the CD and her plan was to draw a line straight across the map and connect with the M4 at the Severn Bridge. It was ghostly and fog all the way out of Wales that night, lost sheep coming at you from groups of wet trees and folds in the hills. "Tregaron to Abergwesyn. One of the great back roads!" Moscow shouted over the music, as they passed a single lonely house in the rain, miles away from anywhere, facing south into the rolling moors of mid-Wales.

Ed shouted back: "They can go faster than this, these 320s." So on the next bend she let the rear end hang out an inch too far and they surfed five hundred feet into a ravine below Cefn Coch, with the BMW crumpled up round them like a chocolate wrapper. Just before they went over, the tape had got to "Sweet Jane"—the live version with the applause welling up across the opening chords as if God himself was stepping out on stage. In the bottom of the ravine a shallow stream ran through pressure-metamorphosed Ordovician shale. Ed sat until day-light the next morning, conscious but unable to move, watching the water hurry toward him and listening to Moscow die of a punctured lung in the heavy smell of fuel. It was a long wait. Once or twice she regained consciousness and said: "I'm sorry, Ed."

Once or twice he heard himself reassure her, "No, it was my fault."

At Southwestern Orthopaedic a consultant told him that key motor nerves had been ripped out of his spine.

"Stuff the fuckers back in again then!" he said, in an attempt to impress her.

She smiled.

"That's exactly what we're going to try," she replied. "We'll do a tuck-and-glue and encourage the spinal cord to send new filaments into the old cable channel."

She thought for a moment.

"We'll be working very close to the cord itself," she warned him.

Ed stared at her.

"It was a joke," he said.

For a while it seemed to work. Two months later he could flex the muscles in his upper legs. But nothing more happened; and, worried that a second try would only make the damage worse, they had to leave it.

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Mile End Monk House. Hanging upside down from a painful foot-hook, you chalk your hands meditatively, staring at the sweaty triangular mark your back left on the blue plastic cover of the mat last time you fell on it. Then, reluctantly, feeling your stomach muscles grind as they curl you upright again, you clutch the starting holds and go for the move: reach up: lock out on two fingers: let your left leg swing out to rebalance: strain upward with your right fingertips, and just as you brush the crucial hold, fall off again.

“Jesus Christ. I don’t know why I come here.”

You come so that next weekend you can get into a Cosworth-engined Merc 190E and drive very fast down the M4 (“No one drives themselves anymore!”) to a limestone outcrop high above the Wye Valley. Let go here and you will not land on a blue safety mat in a puff of chalk dust. Instead you will plummet eighty feet straight down until you hit a small ledge, catapult out into the trees, and land a little later face-first among moss-grown boulders flecked with sunshine. Now all the practice is over. Now you are on the route. Your friends look up, shading their eyes against the white glare of the rock. They are wondering if you can make the move. So are you. The only exit from shit creek is to put two fingers of your left hand into a razor-sharp solution pocket, lean away from it to the full extent of your arm, run your feet up in front of you, and, just as you are about to fall off, lunge with your right hand for the good hold above.

At the top of the cliff grows a large yew tree. You can see it very clearly. It has a short horizontal trunk, and contorted limbs perhaps eighteen inches thick curv-ing out over the drop as if they had just that moment stopped moving. When you reach it you will be safe. But at this stage on a climb, the top of anything is an empty hypothesis. You look up: it might as well be the other side of the Atlantic. All that air is burning away below you like a fuse. Suddenly you’re moving anyway. Excitement has short-circuited the normal connections between intention and action. Where you look, you go. No effort seems to be involved. It’s like falling upward. It’s like that moment when you first understood how to swim, or ride a bike. Height and fear have returned you to your childhood. Just as it was then, your duty is only to yourself. Until you get safely down again, contracts, business meetings, household bills, emotional problems will mean nothing.

When you finally reach that yew tree at the top of the climb, you find it full of grown men and women wearing faded shorts and T-shirts. They are all in their forties and fifties. They have all escaped. With their bare brown arms, their hair bleached out by weeks of sunshine, they sit at every fork or junction, legs dan-gling in the dusty air, like child-pirates out of some storybook of the 1920s: an investment banker from Greenwich, an AIDS counselor from Bow; a designer of French Connection clothes; a publishers' editor. There is a comfortable si-lence broken by the odd friendly murmur as you arrive, but their eyes are in-turned and they would prefer to be alone, staring dreamily out over the valley, the curve of the river, the woods which seem to stretch away to Tintern Abbey and then Wales. This is the other side of excitement, the other pleasure of height: the space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space with—

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You are left with this familiar glitch or loop in the MAX ware. *Suicide Coast* won't play any farther. Reluctantly, you abandon Mick to his world of sad acts, his faith that reality can be relied upon to scaffold his perceptions. To run him again from the beginning would only make the frailty of that faith more obvious. So you wait until everything has gone black, unplug yourself from the machine, and walk away, unconsciously rolling your shoulders to ease the stiffness, massaging the sore place at the back of your neck. What will you do next? Everything is flat out here. No one drives themselves anymore.

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