

This fictional short story was printed in the San Diego Union Tribune newspaper on August 15, 2021.

Unverifiable

I barely noticed the dull thud outside my ground floor office window.

You would think that a human being who had dropped fifteen floors would produce a much more significant, violent sound. I had experienced many odd, tense, and disturbing moments over the years as Regency Hotel manager, but this topped them all. On that clear morning along San Diego Bay in “America’s Finest City” a high schooler chose to kill himself by jumping off the roof of my hotel.

Once the shock had steamrolled me and left its visual imprints--the blanketed lifeless body, the bloody point of impact, the new reporter’s feigned distress--I had the rest of that long day to ask the obvious question. *Why?*

The routine flood of drab paperwork and minor issues returned to my office desk, but the question lingered. I couldn’t imagine why such a young person, with the rest of their life ahead of them, would do such a thing.

...

Instinct told me to go up to the roof throughout that day, but a different intuition called ‘the creeps’ held me back. Then around 5:30pm, as my work day neared its end, the urge turned into a necessity. I logged out of my email, left my phone on my desk, and hopped off the hotel hamster wheel. As I neared the elevator, it dawned on me that I hadn’t been to the building’s rooftop since my first week there. *Was it 10 years ago?! Wasn’t this supposed to be a temporary job before launching my own project?*

The elevator doors parted and an employee’s face greeted me. He must have come up from the basement floor.

“Hi, Mr. Garcia!”

“Hello, Danny.” I said. “What’s up?”

Meant as a casual greeting, it sounded odd when it came out. *What’s up? -The platform of death, that’s what’s up--fifteen floors directly above us.* I stepped in the elevator and pressed “15”.

Danny Santos worked as a room service runner and the only reason I could call him by name was because of his name tag, which was neatly displayed. *Thanks for saving me the Regency name tag policy spiel right now, Danny. That spiel was ingrained.*

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“Um, to the roof,” he said and shrugged uncomfortably.

It occurred to me that I wasn’t the only one in the building with the weight of suicide hanging over me. It affected everyone.

“Do you usually have your fifteen minute break on the roof?” I asked.

“Never. But after today...”

“I get it,” I said. “For some reason I need to go up there too.”

It was easy to access the roof. Once we exited the elevator, signs directed you to an unlocked door marked “Restricted Access.” To the suicidal, it looked more like an invitation than a warning.

The flat roof was what you would expect: thin, coarse roofing sheets layered over each other; a half dozen aluminum vents jutting out. I led Danny to the corner where the boy must have jumped. *Did he run and jump, or take one big step? Did any of these details matter?* I didn't dare get too close to the edge, but sat about six feet away on the corner of a square vent. Danny leaned against the other corner and peered over the edge.

"Feels weird."

"Yeah, very weird," I said.

Was it the beginning of a conversation, or the end? Who knows what to say when you're at a suicide scene for no logical reason and find yourself next to a guy you supervise who's at least twenty years younger?

"How old are you Danny?"

"Nineteen."

The kid, the one who jumped, was only a year or two younger than Danny.

"It's such a waste," I said. "I've been asking myself all day: *Why? Why would someone so young and with their whole life ahead of them want to kill themselves?*"

"Yeah," Danny said, "I wondered the same thing."

"And...?" I asked.

"And I wish I could have talked to the guy."

Exactly what I'd thought earlier that day: If only I could have crossed the jumpers' path before he made it to this fateful edge. But what would I have said?

"What would you have said?" I asked.

"Well, no offense but I wouldn't say anything about his whole life being ahead of him," Danny said. "We all have an unknown amount of life ahead of us. Plus, that's not how high schoolers think. They think about the present--right now. Everything is about today and tomorrow, not years down the road."

Danny reminded me that I had no clue about how a teenager now might feel. *None.* I hadn't been one since the 1990's. Time had flown. Years had escaped me. I took a deep breath.

Danny continued: "But what would I tell him? Damn. That's tough because it could have been anything, from the most significant to the absurd. I mean, it could have been something his parents, or parent, did to him--or just the daily abuse parents can dish out. That could grind someone down to despair."

I nodded as Danny spoke. I'd never heard him say more than a handful of words.

"Or it could have been a relationship gone bad--girlfriend, boyfriend--who knows. The harshness of a first love's broken heart is intense. Way intense--though adults usually don't understand."

Maybe, I thought, as I tried and failed to dig up a clear memory of my own first love.

"Man, it could have been about school, too. It could have been something a teacher said or did. The guy could have been in trouble a lot--you know, disciplinary issues. Could have been humiliated on Tik Tok or Instagram for thousands to troll. Maybe there was a stressful test coming up, or he'd already failed a major test? Maybe he just needed a hug and he was getting slapped in the face everyday instead? Maybe--"

"But, Danny," I interrupted, "Tests, stress, humiliation, getting in trouble, even a bad break up--that happens to everyone. It's unfortunate, but it's no big deal."

"Tell that to a teenager," he said. "You might know how to cope with it, but they don't yet. Everything's a big deal."

"I suppose," I said. "But so much of it's in your head and it's often exaggerated."

“Exactly,” Danny added and nodded. “Which is why I would’ve reminded this kid that *everything is temporary*. Whether it’s a big pimple on your nose, a nasty meme, or a lost love--the emotions they produce are temporary. Sometimes very temporary.... but death is permanent. If you need to change something in your life, then make a change--but the idea that death will solve your problems is insane. Your problems are defined by your own lens; your own understanding of them. So don’t blame others--your parents, your ex, or whoever. Blame your own brain, rethink the situation and remember that everything is temporary. Things will change. Hell, have a symbolic death if you really need to! I mean, go to sleep, enter that darkness, have dreams, and then wake up reborn.”

In the course of Danny’s speech, I forgot he meant it for the jumper and imagined it was directed at *me*.

“You’re a smart kid, Danny,” I said, my focus back on the building’s precipice. “You’re right.”

“But we’ll never know what words might have worked,” he said. “It’s unverifiable.”

“Unverifiable?” I said.

“He’s not around to explain why, so we’ll never know why.”

...

I took the stairs back to my office alone. When I passed through the door’s threshold, something was different. It smelled stale and stuffy. I removed my suit jacket and hung it on the rack, a robotic habit which reminded me of all the other robotic habits that consumed my days. The grey MacBook on my desk sat lifeless. My grey iPhone buzzed a notification, but I imagined it as a fish-out-of-water’s dying last breath. I gazed at the hazy sunset through my office window, but could not ignore the death that still lingered in the space between. It didn’t have to be a teenager’s literal death. It could have--it should have--been symbolic, like Danny said: *Make a change... Go to sleep and wake up reborn*.

That morning’s suicide, the weight of it, the question why--made me face a frightening fact. In asking *why* for the jumper, I began asking *why* for myself--that existential question we all face and either confront or ignore.

I’d ignored it for too long.

And this is why, at 6:20pm that same evening, I returned to the hotel’s rooftop. I felt the wind on my face, closed my eyes and told myself ‘*Don’t be afraid.*’ Fear had stifled me for years. On the aluminum vent I had sat on earlier, I placed a notepad, pulled out a Hotel Regency pen, and wrote my letter of resignation.

-Dominic Carrillo