

Zolo

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One foot in front of the other, steady against the wind. Zolo could not look down. He knew if he kept his eyes dead straight on the tops of the other tower block he could keep going. One. Two. Three. Gently against the firmness of the concrete, he could keep grounded. He wouldn't fall. There'd be no rush of sirens, nor the excited din of the estate gathering, his mum would never
5 know that her ten-year-old boy had walked the edge of the tower block roof - and not at knifepoint but of his own free will. Worse, what if they thought he'd jumped. He *topped his-self*, that's what they'd say. No way, thought Zolo. They can all go fuck themselves.

He hated heights. At school when he had to walk up two flights of stairs to his classroom, he climbed the stairs on the inside, away from the tall windows on the outer wall of the stairwell.
10 Even then if his eye accidentally caught a glimmer of the sun through the glass, or the thin, high branches of the tree which brushed the window, something in his body swam and he felt he might fall. He didn't let the other kids see. His mum might call him a stupid shit, but he wasn't dumb.

Now, on top of the wall, twenty-five storeys up he didn't just feel the pull of the earth downwards. He felt the familiar tug of the sky. Sometimes, when he was walking to school, or
15 running through the estate with the other boys he'd feel a lightness, an uneasy pull: the sky was trying to suck him up, into the blue where he'd be lost forever. Don't look up. Zolo would stare at his shoes and the sky would loosen its noose.

Don't look up. Don't look down. Don't step on the cracks. Those are the rules, Zolo reminded himself. Just keep going.

20 The edges of the roof were raised concrete, a metre thick and a metre high. The people who walked the wall were mostly nutters or psychos, or a combination of the two. When the teenagers did it, they showed off - one palm on the concrete and then a kind of jump with two feet onto the wall, as if they were skateboarding or something. At least that's what Spider Syd, CJ, and Kaz from the maisonettes, did.

25 For kids Zolo's age, walking the inside of the wall's perimeter was enough to show you weren't a wimp. When he did that the first time, the block boys' eyes on him, Zolo held his breath and stomach tightly. He walked the four inside walls, staring rigidly at the floor, one hand groping wallside; reached his start point and vomited, the jeers and yelps mixing with the sounds of his body's gurgles and retches.

30 This time, no one was watching. And this time, he was on top of the wall, one skinny, tin-pot rail about ten centimetres high and a ruler-length from the edges, between him and the sheer drop. Zolo had pulled himself up on one corner of the tower's large, rectangular roof. He put one hand firm on each wall and hoisted himself over the broken bottles, fast food boxes and the small metal canisters emptied of laughing gas, that the teenagers had thrown away; holding his breath
35 to steady himself against his fear, and to block out the wafting smells of urine mixed with fried chicken.

As he sat on the corner, the grey blocks and green strips of the estate falling away on either

side, dizziness hit him. A shockwave travelling from the distant ground, right up, higher, higher, higher - till bang. In the face. Zolo took a moment to steady himself. Closed his eyes. Don't look.
40 Whatever you do. Don't look down. Then he had opened his eyes straight ahead, raised one knee, then the other. And stood.

From the solid corner of the concrete roof, Zolo stood and placed one foot in front of the other. That's all it is. One foot. Then the other. One foot. Then the other.

45 His stomach settled. He was halfway across the first wall when a pigeon flew straight past, shaving close to his face, to land in the fast food boxes in the corner. Zolo's body tilted so slightly backwards; a small stick on the top of the tall tower that swayed a minuscule one degree, two degrees, backwards as the pigeon whizzed in front of his eyes. It was enough to see the mangy brown feathers that tapered to dirty white against the wide sky. Enough to feel the world tilt.

50 Zolo's body swayed forwards an inch, recalibrated itself. He felt sick. And annoyed. He glanced sideways at the flat concourse of the roof and saw the pigeon ambling back across, half a thin chip in its beak. Zolo wanted to kick it. His leg wanted to go forwards towards the bird, like little kids do. Like Zakky used to do. Chasing pigeons like a mini footballer with stumpy legs and a big nappy, yelping when the pigeons finally upped and moved a metre away and continued with whatever they were doing, nonplussed.

55 Now the toddler sat all day, belted into his buggy facing the wall of his mum's bedroom. He didn't cry anymore. Just sat with a blank, tired look on his face. Zakky's dad left. Mum didn't want anything to do with the baby. You change his nappy then if you're so bothered,' she told Zolo. 'Turn the buggy round and see his dad's ugly mug? No, he's right as rain.'

60 Big Ray came round. He wasn't big. More average. He was only called Big Ray on account of there being a Little Ray years before in their class at Clearbrook Field Primary. Zolo's mum and Big Ray stayed in for days, the walls of the flat slowly staining with smoke, bottles piling up by the sofa. They lived in the 'penthouse' as his mum called it, right there at the top of the tower. Zolo was okay inside, he just never went too close to the windows or stood on the balcony if he could help it. But with Zakky facing the wall, and mum and Big Ray not moving in the living room, Zolo
65 had to sort things. He'd had enough of going to school with stinking clothes; kids pinching their noses and pelting small, hard rectangles of soap from the school toilets at him. He washed his uniform in the bathroom sink and edged onto the balcony. He'd tell himself the bars around the balcony would keep him safe. He wouldn't fall. He shut his eyes and felt for the plastic washing line that went lengthways across the balcony's narrow middle as he hung up his wet school shirt
70 and trousers.

He'd give Zakky a bottle. Sometimes he'd mash the baby a banana the way his mum used to. He'd lump it onto a plastic baby spoon and raise it to Zakky's mouth, but the baby would turn his face away and strain his belted body sideways. Zolo turned the baby's buggy round once, at the beginning when he was still screaming, but his mum had come in heavily from behind him with a sharp jolt to the small of Zolo's back. He tried to change the baby's nappies, he remembered how
75 Zakky's dad did it, but the baby was sore and screaming, and Zolo could only manage it now and again.

Then the electric went off. Big Ray had left by then. 'Mum, get the electric.' But Zolo's mum buried her head deeper into the sofa. 'Give me the money then and I'll go to the shop and charge the key.' She didn't answer and there was nothing in her bag.
80

Days went by and the smell started. A low, slightly nauseous hum at first. But after several more days, and a sudden summer heat that seemed to raise steam from the estate's concrete

bones and strip the tops of men and boys to skins, the smell was beyond anything Zolo could have imagined. You choked in it. Your lungs deflated trying to squeeze every bit of the poison out and yet breathe at the same time. It wiped out all hunger. The rancour of rotting meat.

85 The smell spilled from the fridge, to the kitchen, to the whole flat. A noxious, invisible mist; it began to seep from under the door, out into the shared corridor, past the neighbours' doors and to the lifts.

'Come here,' Mrs C from next door beckoned as Zolo waited for the lifts. 'What's that smell?' She took a deep drag on her cigarette. Flecks of ash fell onto her patterned nylon shirt, before tumbling to the ground.

'Dunno,' said Zolo, watching the dying motes fall, and staring at flat, black circles of gum stuck to the floor where they landed.

95 'I haven't seen Zakky for a while,' she said, waving her cigarette smoke with a gnarled hand over the stench like perfume.

Zolo shrugged and walked towards the door of the stairwell.

Social Services called round later that day. A greying, lank man with trainers and a hard face. Zolo thought social workers were supposed to look kind, to children at least. 'It was you, wasn't it? You fucking grassed,' his mum's eyes bulged afterwards. 'I never,' said Zolo. And she went for him.

100 After that Zolo knew the sky would suck him up for sure. He could feel invisible strings like comic-book zaps coming at him when he was out-of-doors, unprotected, outside. And he knew he had to find a way to control it. To make it all right. He had to front it out. That's when he knew he had to walk the wall.

105 Zolo got to the first corner, broad and sharp against the sky. He felt his chest expand. He could breathe. Now turn.

110 The view changed, the same grey rectangles and green lines fell below, but look straight ahead and past the tops of the other towers and there in the hazy distance were the gleaming pinnacles of the City. He tried to focus, but his attention drifted out towards the glass skyscrapers in their improbable shapes: concave; convex, skinny in the middle and flaring out at the top; sharp and pointy. Could you walk those? Probably not - there didn't look like there were any flat parts to their tops. But if you could. If you could. You'd be Superman.

115 Maybe Spider Syd could? Spider Syd (otherwise called Syeed) had long, thin legs and equally spindly arms. He lived in one of the seven-storey blocks next to Zolo's high-rise. A daredevil from a young age, Syd was legendary among the kids of the estate; rushing up his block's central stairwell to his cousin's flat at the top of the building. There he would appear on the balcony and dangling off the side rails, would hang-drop level to level. The kids would gather at the bottom, while he gracefully pulled his body taut and hung and swung his way down seven floors of the building; landing with a balletic backflip over brambles and onto grass verge to whoops and some jeers (no one likes a show-off), and a healthy dose of swearing from the residents whose balconies he'd breached.

120 When Spider Syd had walked the wall, it was for no other reason than he really was a show-off. Zolo imagined he was Syd. But he couldn't muster Syd's cocky ease. Instead the gleaming buildings were calling him. Calling him to look. To drift over the blue sky to dreams built of brilliant glass.

125 And Zolo was drifting. Up and up. A helium balloon let go by Zakky in the days when his dad was still around, and mum still loved Zakky; buying him candy floss, and a Mickey Mouse-shaped

balloon when the sorry excuse for a fairground (three faded rides, an unscary ghost train, a couple of stalls) set up on the wiry grass of the local park on the bank holiday weekend. Zolo saw Zakky's mouth ringed pink and grainy with strands of wet candy floss.

130 Drifting, Zolo's body forgot itself. Three-quarters of the way across the second wall, it was as if he suddenly awoke and did not know where he was. The steadiness in his body unfurled and he was a paper cut-out boy swaying in the wind. Focus. Focus. One foot. Then the other. One foot. Then the other. Nausea hit Zolo as the solidity of his body seemed to melt away. No. Fix on one thing. One thing. He steadied his gaze. And breathed slowly in and out. In and out. His stomach
135 settled and he felt the firm reality of the concrete wall through his trainers. He made it to the end of the second wall.

Turning on the second corner, Zolo wished it were over. He knew he had to do it. But would it work? Tomorrow, the grey social worker would be back with his colleague, and they would look and judge and decide. When the Social had come round, Zolo's mum thought quickly on her feet
140 and said she'd been too ill to go out and top up the electric, but she was well again now and yes everything was all right, the baby was like that because he'd been ill too, and he felt comfy in his buggy.

Zolo's mum had topped up the electric and cleaned the flat. She'd emptied the fridge, a cloth tied in a triangle around her mouth and nose like a cowboy in an old Western. With armfuls of
145 kitchen towel she'd soaked up the putrid liquids pooling in the base of the fridge and in the plastic vegetable trays. She scrubbed and sprayed and sprayed and scrubbed. She used a whole can of air freshener until only a faint murmur of rotting flesh was left in the air behind a heavy veil of White Linen.

She'd cleaned Zakky. She took him out of the buggy, bathed him, gave him a fresh nappy and
150 clean clothes. But Zakky had looked limp. His eyes glassy; not like the beautiful, shining glass of the skyscrapers, but like small marbles set in sockets. He went back and sat in the buggy of his own accord, his thin hands hanging by his sides.

Zolo kept going. He told himself he was past halfway and he just needed to do the same
155 again. His stomach was getting used to the height. If he looked straight ahead he could trick his mind so it felt neither the pull of the sky, nor of the ground. You could get used to anything really.

The third corner. Zolo felt a different feeling in his gut now. A bubbling - not nausea -
160 something rising, something powerful like hope without the placidity of hope. It was restless and fiery. He hadn't known this sensation before. It told him that he would do it. He would make it all the way round. He placed his feet carefully, but more resolutely now. If he had looked to the side, he might have seen a few people, like ants moving around at the base of the tower, slowly gathering. But he kept on. Zolo was now steps away from his goal.

Three. Two. One. Home.

Zolo stood on that final corner. A small boy on a tall tower. He closed his eyes and felt the
165 sun on his lids and the blowing wind soft on his face. He had done it. He was all right. He didn't know what would happen tomorrow. Whether they would stay or be taken away. But right then, it didn't matter.

He opened his eyes and sat slowly down on the concrete corner. Cross-legged at first, he uncurled his right leg, then his left, hooking them over the low, thin rail and dangled them over the precipice. One leg either side of the hard corner. Above a falling world.